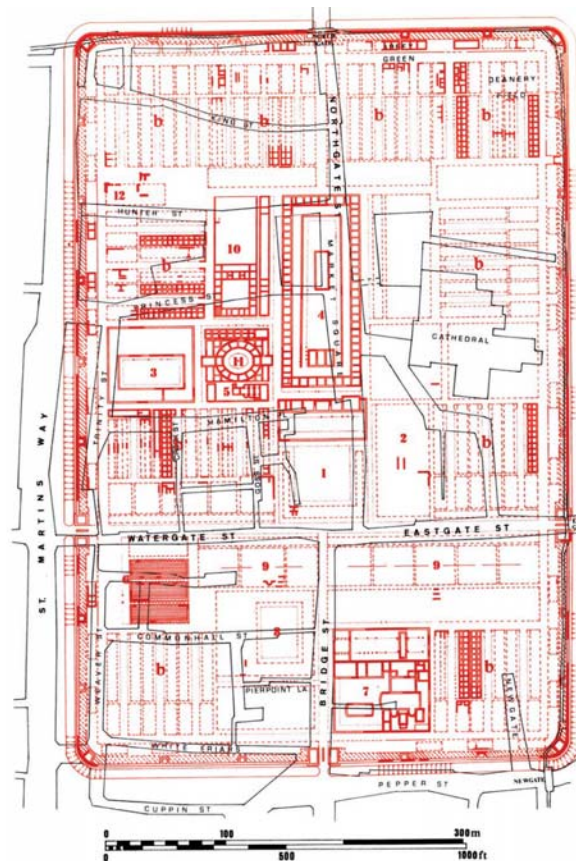Existing Public Realm Context

# 2.3 ~ A Brief History of Chester

Chester's history has been well documented in a range of recent reports and commissions undertaken by Cheshire West and Chester and Chester Renaissance. It is not the purpose of the PRDG to recount Chester's history in great detail, but by describing the key factors influencing the evolution of the city, the evolution of the public realm can be understood.

**Roman Chester**

Chester owes its existence as a city and its plan to the Romans who established the legionary fortress of Deva in AD 76 in an advantageous position close to the Welsh mountains on a raised outcrop at the lowest bridging point on the River Dee. As the plan opposite shows the form of the basic grid pattern of today's city centre core is owed to the original fortress and the bases for some of the original walls are still visible on the northeastern and eastern sides. Deva was of great importance to the governance of Roman Britain and in establishing military rule in the northwest. Over time Chester's military importance declined, making way for trading and residential development outside the Roman walls (mainly around Foregate Street). At the same time the city was developing as a river port, servicing industry, such as the lead mines in Flintshire.



Roman Chester (circa AD 70) – The fortress shown in relation to the current street layout

Key
b: Barracks
1: Headquarters
2: Legionary Commanders Residence
3: Workshops
4: Masonary building purpose unknown
5: Bath House (associated with elliptical building)
6: Granaries
7: Fortress Baths
8: Hospital
9: Tribunes House
10: Store Building
11: Elliptical Building
12: Granary

### Saxon Chester

After the Romans left Deva the city quickly fell into ruin and it is likely the local inhabitants lived in or around the decaying fortress. The Danes came in the 9th century AD and the Mercians used Chester as a base to fight the invading Viking forces. It was the Saxons who rebuilt the city in the 10th century AD, reestablishing the city's strategic importance as a military and trading centre. This work involved the repair and enlarging of the walls to their current position. The Saxons named Chester 'Legacaestir' from 'fortress city of the legions'. Eventually this name was shortened to Chester.

### Norman Chester

Following the Norman invasion of England, Chester became a stronghold for Norman rule in the northwest and once again the city acted as a regional administrative and military capital.

### Medieval and Post Reformation Chester

The last town in England to fall to William the Conqueror, Chester was given the status of a Palatine County in 1070 and was ruled by a series of Earls independent of the King of England. However, the King reestablished his superiority in 1237, allowing the city to be used as a valuable base from which to fight wars with the Welsh.

Chester grew in prosperity during the 13th and 14th century due to the city's importance as the premier port in the region. The import of goods from Ireland such as pelts, hides and foodstuffs, and from further afield in Europe, resulted in the growth of trade and related industries. The arms of a few of the original Guilds can still be seen in King Charles' Tower. At the same time the city's Freeman also

became established. Edward I's use of Chester as a supply centre for his campaigns in North Wales also supported trade.

This productive era resulted in the unique and intriguing legacy of The Rows, which are likely to have been built over the original Roman ruins. It is thought that over time the street level of The Rows was rebuilt, possibly as a result of fires, leading to the building of the stone vaulted cellars that are an important part of Chester's characteristic architecture.
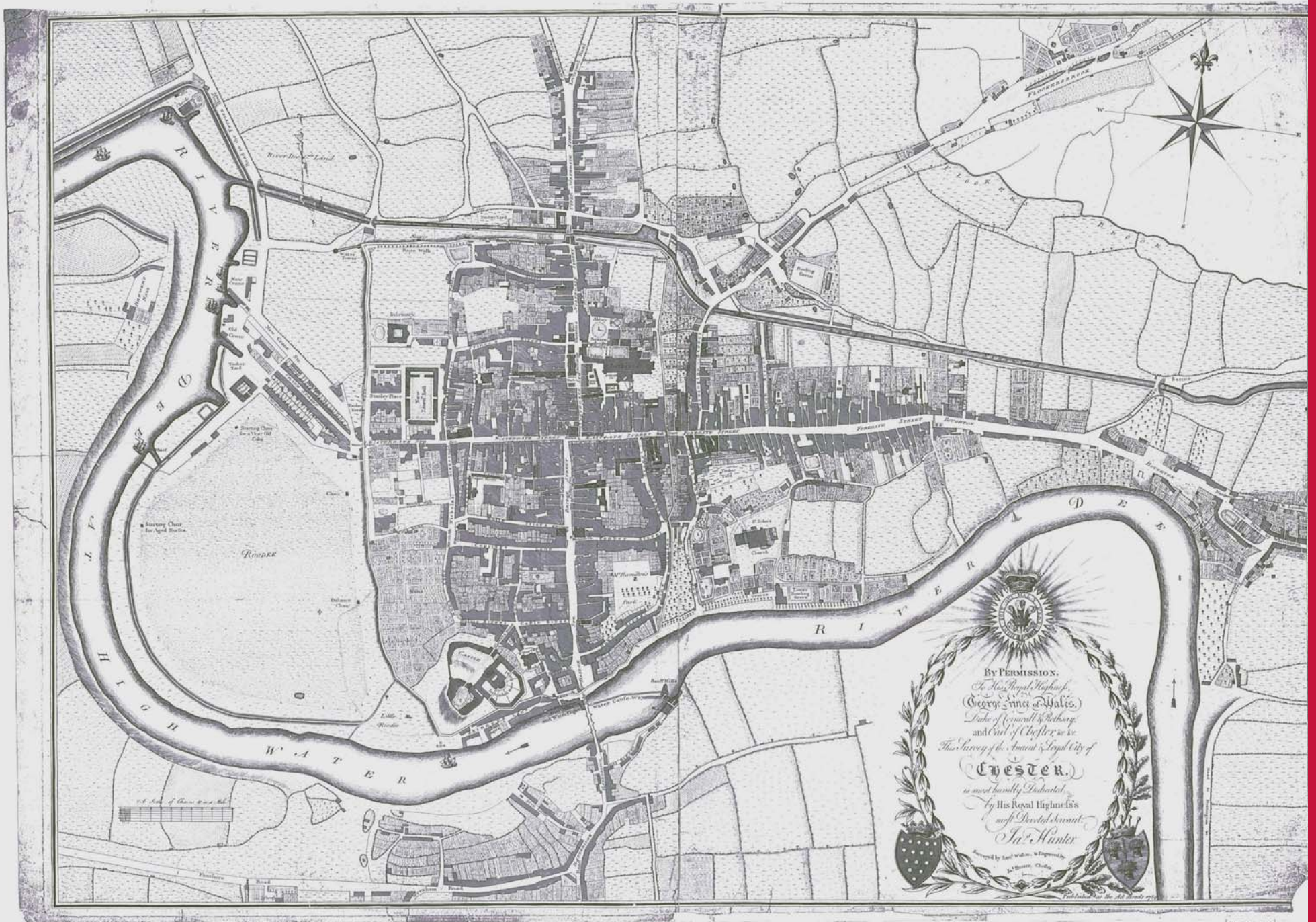


Print of the crypt, Bridge Street

Henry VIII's reformation and dissolution of the monasteries in the Tudor period radically changed the religious makeup of the city.

The silting up of the river in the 15th century resulted in commercial decline. This was followed by occurrences of a plague in the 16th century. These events were compounded by the Civil War which left a permanent mark on the city following the Parliamentary besiegement of 1644-46, as it resulted in damage to much of medieval Chester.

Some of the medieval architecture that survives in Chester today, apart from the stone vaults, parts of the city walls and parts of The Rows, is found in its churches, namely Chester Cathedral (originally founded on its site in the 10th century), St Peter's (the oldest church dating from AD 907), St John's and St Mary's on the Hill.

### Georgian Chester

The Georgian period has left its mark on Chester and as a time of great wealth the era brought change and growth. The Georgian legacy, led by Thomas Harrison, includes the four main entrance gates to the city walls (Northgate, Watergate, Bridgegate and Eastgate), the Grosvenor Bridge and Abbey Square. In addition, industrial advances left its mark, most notably with the building of the canals in the late 1700s. Finally, the reconstruction of the city walls between 1701 and 1708 to allow walking on walls gave birth to Chester's subsequent development as a pleasure and tourist destination.

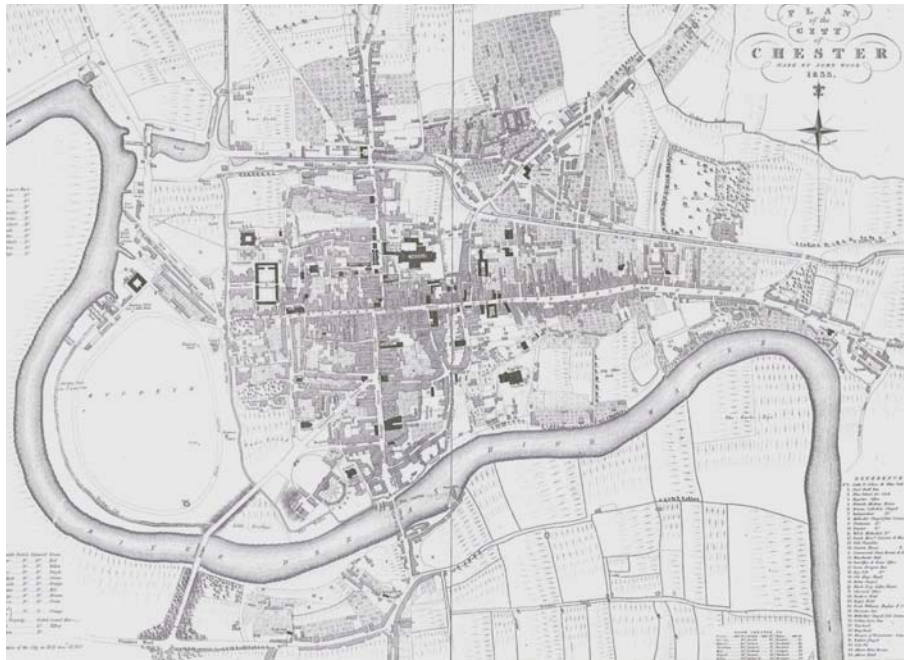Georgian Chester (1789) – Hunter's map

**Victorian and Edwardian Chester**

The appetite for rebuilding in the 18th century was equalled if not surpassed by the Victorians. A combination of great civic pride and economic stability led to the birth of modern Chester as a county town, business and tourist centre in the Victorian period. Public buildings, such as the Town Hall, and public parks were created.

Four competent local architects embarked on the great 'Black and White' revival, which led to many of the city centre facades that Chester is now famous for, such as the Crypt House of Brown's of Eastgate Street, the east side of St Werburgh Street and west side of Northgate Street.

Additional prosperity came with the building of the railway station in 1848, which resulted in the expansion of Chester's urban area and formation of its suburbs.



Early Victorian Era 1833



Chester in the Victorian Era (1874) – Following the arrival of the railway

**20th Century Chester**

During the 20th century the city began to recognise, conserve and exploit its most valuable assets as a tourism resource, resulting in even greater numbers of vehicles on Chester's city centre streets. At times the drive for modernity that occurred during the 1950s and 60s threatened the historic fabric of Chester and in places this era has left its mark.  The most significant impact was the construction of the inner ring road and other traffic infrastructure, but in the main the most important parts of the townscape have survived.

It was in recognition of the impact contemporary development was having on Chester's townscape that there was a shift in public opinion and the Civic Trust (founded in 1959) became a voice for local concerns.  As a result, the Insall report was published in 1968 and with the government's support it altered the course of development policy in the city.  It demonstrated that the restoration of historic buildings could improve the economy and attractiveness of the city, through the preservation of the city's unique qualities for residents and visitors.  In 1969 the whole of the city centre was designated a conservation area.  In 1972 a permanent archaeological team was established to ensure that the losses to the city's heritage that occurred during the 1960s were not repeated.



Chester in the Interwar Period (1938) – Prior to the construction of the ring road

**21st Century Chester**

Today, the city is home to approximately 120000 inhabitants and accommodates approximately 7 million tourists annually. Chester Renaissance's programme aims to conserve, manage and enhance heritage assets and address some of the inappropriate development of the mid 20th century that impacts upon Chester's appeal, in order to sustain and grow Chester's economy. Planned projects and developments will see a substantial investment in the city in the next few years.

## Relevance to the PRDG

As the brief historic summary above demonstrates, Chester benefits from a rich history which has left a legacy of striking buildings and attractive streetscapes. Individual quality within the built fabric is evident from the many periods of architecture and city building. As important as any fine individual building is the collective value of this varied townscape. This is typified by varied buildings set within coherent and well-defined streets. These streets establish a strong and distinct urban form with a special character and sense of place. The public streets and spaces shaped by and formed between the buildings are as important to the experience of place in Chester and the pattern of streets and spaces is something which has endured and evolved over many centuries.

An important part of this heritage townscape is the richness and quality of design, with traditional materials and craftsmanship key constituent parts of the wider building palette.

Comfortable scale, particularly human-scale is an intrinsic quality of buildings, streets and spaces. The quality of 'controlled variety' is also important as evidenced by the traditional proportions uniting what are often very different styles of building. Within the public realm the combination of natural materials and robust construction, create a simple backcloth and setting but with a similarly enduring sense of quality and character. It is this essence of place that the PRDG needs to capture to inform the future design of streets and spaces in Chester.

All of this establishes a deep sense of character and quality within the core of the city. Streets and buildings have settled into their place and now create an enduring sense of quality and authenticity, which offers a timeless appearance. Whilst there are areas of the city where this sense of historic quality has been fractured or eroded, it is the remit of the PRDG to guide the rehabilitation of these areas to once again become part of Chester's rich and distinctive public realm.

**Traffic at The Cross in 1960s**