

# Heritage Festival Trail

Chester

Our Guide



Chester's history often is not neat and tidy. You are in a city where Roman, Medieval, Tudor, Stuart, Georgian & Victorian influences jostle for position along streets nearly 2000 years old - sometimes these influences happily rub shoulders in the same building. This short guide really mixes it up, but we hope that at the end of your walk you will have a little more of an understanding of how the largest fortress in Roman Britain became the city we know and love, spending several hundred years as one of the most important ports on the west coast along the way.

## Your Walk

Your walk starts at the **Visitor Information Centre (VIC)**, located in the Town Hall (more of which later, when we finish our tour). The walk is a little over 2.5 miles (4km) long.



*As you leave the VIC, turn right and head down Northgate Street. The stretch of buildings on your right, with the colourful signage of Mollie's Sweet Shop greeting you, were built between 1897 – 1909 and are great examples of Chester's black & white revival. This half-timbered style dominated Chester's architecture in the late 19th century and early decades of the 20th century, and we will meet many more examples on our walk.*

One of the current businesses who have found a home in this group of buildings is Pret a Manger. It is in their cellar that you can find impressive remains of the columns of the Principia, the HQ building of the Roman fortress of Deva (to view the remains, join one of the Roman Soldier tours that leave the VIC daily). We will see more of Deva later, but you are now standing at the heart of what for over 350 years was the largest of Roman Britain's three mighty fortresses, home to the 20th Legion. A little further down on the left, just beyond Starbucks, we get our first glimpse of the **Rows**, the covered galleries that line Chester's main streets above street level. First mentioned at the end of the 13th century, the Rows have fascinated visitors and locals alike for over 700 years. They are unique to the city and today give Chester its distinctive 'double decker' townscape.

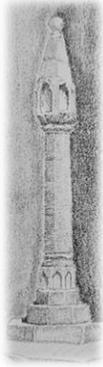
The Rows today are home to a whole range of businesses, from pubs, restaurants, and cafes to quirky independent shops. Some areas are bustling with visitors, while other parts can be surprisingly quiet, providing a pleasant spot to take a moment and watch the busy street below.

Their precise origins are unknown. One suggestion is that they were constructed on top of the rubble remaining from Roman Deva, as much of the fortress's stonework remained a thousand years after it was built. The devastating fire suffered by the city in 1278, a period when Chester was an important medieval port, may have spurred their development as much of the city was rebuilt.

The Rows once bore the names of the various trades who clustered there. For example, Watergate Street was the site of Butchers Row. Such was the fame of the Rows that notable visitors to the city commented on them. Most comments were complimentary, but in the 1720s 'Robinson Crusoe' author Daniel Defoe complained that they made the city look 'both old and ugly'.

*Continue down Northgate Street, which soon comes to an end where it meets Eastgate Street, with Bridge Street and Watergate Street just to your right.* These are Chester's four main streets and they come together at the area called the Cross.

A stone pillar called the **High Cross** sat on this site from the 14th century until 1646, when it was destroyed by Cromwell's troops during the English Civil War. Fragments were kept and used in its 20th century restoration, with the High Cross returning to its rightful place in 1975. Today this prominent spot is the location for the Town Crier's proclamations during the summer months.



Sitting proudly at the Cross is **St Peter's Church**. A church has been here since the early 10th century, on the site of the Roman Principia building and today St Peter's displays features from throughout its history. 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 Chester.

*Head past St Peter's 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.

There are several notable buildings as we head along the street. The first building we meet is on the left and is known as **God's Providence House**, thanks to the description easily viewed from the street that claims:

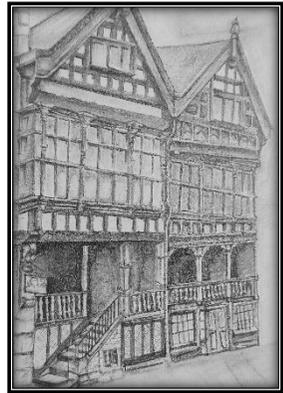
**'GODS PROVIDENCE IS MINE INHERITANCE'**

It is said to be thanks for keeping everyone in the building safe from the plague that hit the city in 1647-8. Originally dating from the mid-17th century, it was rebuilt, using some of the original timbers, in 1862.

A little further down on the left is **Leche House**, a half-timbered medieval town house considered the best preserved in Chester. The building has features from many periods in its long history, from a medieval great hall to 18<sup>th</sup> century graffiti. Its 14<sup>th</sup> century undercrofts is now the home of the Weasel & the Bug toy shop.

Quickly coming up on your right is **Booth Mansion**. This impressive house, the largest house in Watergate Street, dates from 1700 and was built for George Booth, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Warrington. The brick frontage is angled slightly so it could be better seen from the Cross. This encroachment onto the street saw the Earl fined £10, but the architect retained the Row, whereas others had enclosed them. Behind the facade lie numerous features of two medieval town houses.

Back on the left-hand side is **Bishop Lloyd's House**. Also grandly titled Bishop Lloyd's Palace, it began life as two separate houses and has seen numerous alterations, including a restoration at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. George Lloyd served as Bishop of Chester from 1605 until his death 10 years later.



Watergate Street meets the inner ring road shortly after the Rows have come to an end 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.

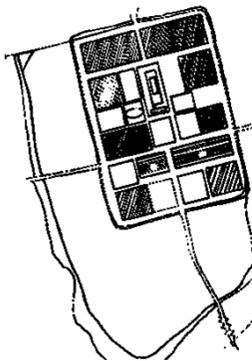
*Use the pedestrian crossing to what is often now called Lower Watergate Street and head past half-timbered Stanley Palace towards the stone archway. Stanley Palace* dates from 1591 and although built as a town house, it has also been a school and museum. The arch ahead is the **Watergate** and beyond 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 the 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 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.*

What you can see now of course is **Chester Racecourse**. The first races were held here in 1539, making it the world's oldest racecourse still in operation. A little over a mile in length, race meetings are very popular and are held from May until September.



You are now standing on the **city walls**, the longest and most complete in the country. Originally built for protection, they are now one of the city's major visitor attractions.

The first walls were originally constructed by the Romans, who established the fortress of Deva here. The early timber & earth structure was soon rebuilt in stone and much of the northern and eastern circuit of the walls still follows the line of the Roman fortress wall. The city was refortified by the Anglo-Saxon Queen Aethelflaed in the early 10<sup>th</sup> century, as a stronghold against Viking raids. Following the Norman conquest of England, the walls were extended to the west and south to their present line, including the spot where you now stand.

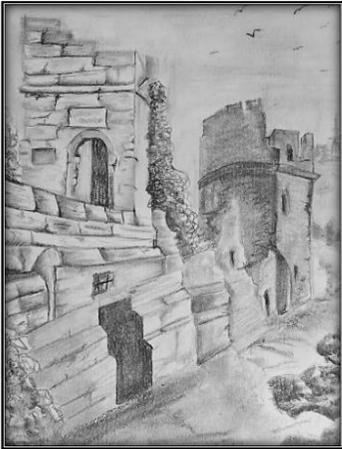
*Head north along the city wall. On your right, just before you reach the neat Georgian terraces of Stanley Place, is a small porch sticking out from what is called **Sedan House**. It often goes unnoticed, but the*

name of the house gives a big clue to its purpose. The porch allowed those lucky enough to be carried in a sedan chair to enter the building.

On your left, you are passing where medieval ships would have anchored below on what are now playing fields belonging to the Queen's School opposite.

A little further ahead on your right is the former **Royal Infirmary**. Built in 1761, it served the citizens of Chester for over 200 years.

*Continue along the wall and within a minute or two you will arrive at the two towers that stand at the north west corner of the city wall, just beyond where the railway bisects the wall.*



The nearest structure, the splendidly named **Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower**, was first recorded in 1249 and eventually became a gatehouse to the nearby **Water Tower**. The 14th century Water Tower joins Bonewaldesthorpe'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.

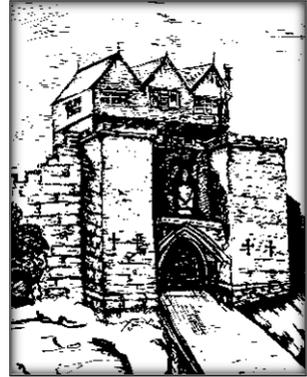
At Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower the wall turns sharp right. To your left, beyond the wall lies the canal basin. This was the meeting point of the Chester & Ellesmere Canals, both of which were later absorbed into the **Shropshire Union Canal**. The brick building facing you is Telford's Warehouse. Now a popular live music venue, it started life in 1790, taking its name from its builder, the famous engineer Thomas Telford.

The wall soon crosses the railway again. Opened in 1848, this is the main line along the North Wales coast. The railways arrived in Chester in 1840, with the present station also opening in 1848.

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 a medieval structure which also

housed a notorious jail. Standing on the Northgate will give you a great view down Northgate Street. On the right-hand side you will see where the pavement passes through the **Bluebell Inn**. The building dates to the late 15th century and began life as two houses. Spin around to face north, and away from the city centre and you will see the **Bluecoat School**, on the opposite side of the canal. Built in 1717 with later extensions, it housed a school until 1949.



Continue eastwards along the wall. On your right you will see **Rufus Court**, a small courtyard accessed from the walls with independent shops, cafes, and bars. Peering over the city walls on your left reveals the canal, lying deep below the northern wall of the Roman Fortress.

Ahead, at the north east corner of the wall, sits the **Phoenix Tower**, taking its name from the carved phoenix above the lower doorway. This dates to 1613 and is the emblem of the City Guild of Painters, Glaziers, Embroiderers and Stationers who once held their meetings there.

The tower is also known as King Charles Tower and it is from here that Charles I is said to have watched the defeat of his army in 1645 at the nearby battle of Rowton Heath. The people of Chester suffered during the Civil War and the Royalist defenders of the city were under siege by the forces of Oliver Cromwell's Parliamentary forces. The city eventually surrendered, but only after holding out for over 12 months.



On your right is a pleasant green oasis called the **Deanery Field**. Peaceful now, it once housed some of the 20<sup>th</sup> Legion's barrack blocks. Each block housed 80 men (a 'century' in Roman military terms) and the centurion who commanded them.

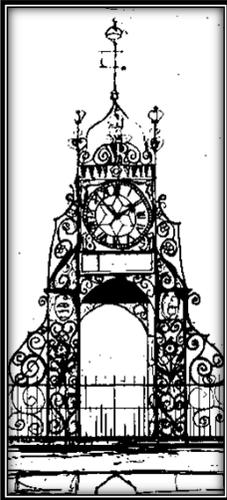
Opening up ahead of you are wonderful views of the Cathedral and soon, where the walls meet the Georgian terraced Abbey Street, you

will be above the **Kaleyards gate**. This small 13<sup>th</sup> century gate was built into the wall to allow monks access to their vegetable garden that lay just beyond the walls. A little further ahead on your right is the slate clad **Addleshaw Tower**, home of the cathedral bells since the mid-1970s.

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 11<sup>th</sup> 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 Bishop of Chester in 1541.

What you can see inside the cathedral is way beyond the scope of this guide, but we certainly recommend a visit.



Walk a little further and up the short flight of steps and you are now under the famous **Eastgate Clock**. Take in the wonderful view of Eastgate Street, Chester's principal shopping street. OK, we are perhaps a touch biased, but the view from here is fabulous. The clock itself was erected in 1899 to commemorate the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria two years earlier. It is said to be the second most photographed clock in England (after Big Ben). You are of course also standing over what was once the eastern entrance to the Roman fortress of Deva.

*Continue along the walls until you reach the **Newgate**.* Constructed in the 1930s, it stands above Pepper Street and replaced an earlier gateway once known as **Wolfgate** (which still exists, literally next door). There is space here to walk around freely and admire the view of the **Roman Amphitheatre**, but why not pop down, explore it, and on a fine day maybe sit on the surrounding grass and let your imagination take you back the best part of 2000 years.

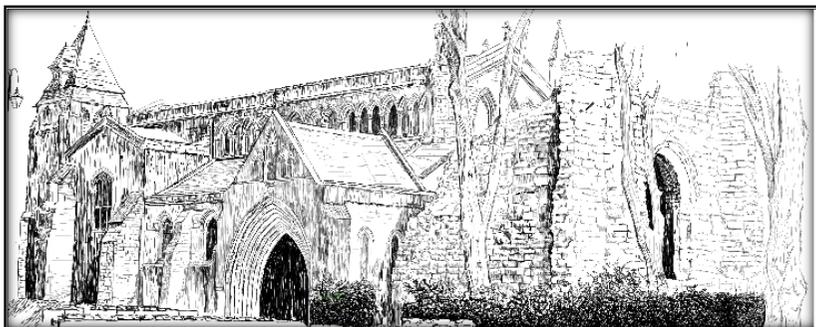
The Amphitheatre would have been used for military drills and training as well as for public addresses and entertainment, including gladiatorial combat. The site was home to two amphitheatres - the original smaller stone structure was replaced with a much more impressive structure that could seat 8000 spectators.

It was only rediscovered in 1929 when excavations for a planned new road uncovered evidence of its location. Luckily, the Chester Archaeological Society raised sufficient funds to have the road diverted around its perimeter.

Many important finds have been discovered, including an altar dedicated to Nemesis, the Roman goddess of fate, which is now in the excellent Grosvenor Museum, which we will see later.

Following excavations, the site was eventually opened to the public in 1972 and is now a big attraction. About two fifths of the amphitheatre is visible and debate continues locally whether the rest of the site, which lies under **Dee House** (itself a listed Georgian/Victorian building), should be excavated. Chester's long history means that it is inevitable that excavation of one era will impact on later periods, often leading to a lively exchange of views.

Beyond the amphitheatre sits the **Church of St John the Baptist**, Chester's first cathedral. 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**. The park opened in 1867 and is well worth a leisurely detour from our walk. Recently restored, it is a great example of a Victorian public park. You will notice the name Grosvenor is prominent throughout Chester. The Grosvenor family seat is at Eaton Hall, a few miles south of Chester.

The path from St John's passes by the ruins of the eastern end of the church and descends steeply to the River Dee, passing by the **Anchorite's Cell** across the land to 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 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.

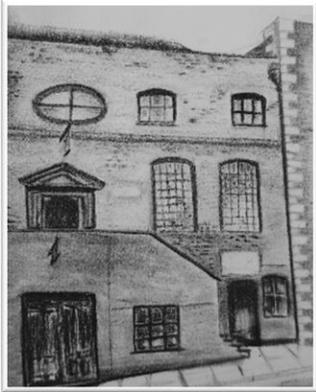
Ahead, where you reach the River Dee, sits the **Queens Park Bridge**. Opened in 1932, it is the second suspension bridge on the site, replacing a Victorian bridge.

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, also known as Hugh Lupus (meaning Wolf), it was designed to provide power for the watermills that once stood close by.

The Old Dee Bridge dates to the 14th century, but an earlier 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 and you will soon 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 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 look to your left and you will see the tower of **St Mary's on the Hill**, another of Chester's medieval parish churches. Now an arts centre, 14th & 15th century features survive later restorations. A little further beyond is St Mary's Hill, one of the steepest residential streets to be found anywhere.



Ahead of you lies **Chester Castle**. Founded in 1070 by Hugh Lupus, the castle was comprehensively remodelled some 200 years ago by the architect Thomas Harrison. The **Cheshire Military Museum** is on your left and tells the story of the county's soldiers from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards, while if you look ahead beyond the castle car park and in the left-hand corner you will see the 13<sup>th</sup> 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**. Opened in 1886, it is 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).

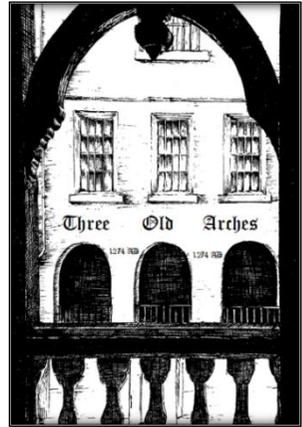
Standing at the crossroads is **St Michael's Church**. A church has stood here since the 12<sup>th</sup> century and the present building contains work from several periods of Chester's history. During the Civil War siege, the church was used as a prison. In 1972 it was declared redundant as a church. It then became a heritage centre, the first in Britain, and is now home to 'Sick to Death'. It is a further example of the layering of histories as the site of the church is also the site of the eastern abutment of the South Gate of the Roman fortress.

Stroll up Bridge Street and on your left, you will soon see the **Three Old Arches** above the JoJo Maman Bebe store. This is one of the

earliest surviving shop fronts in England, dating back to the 13th century.

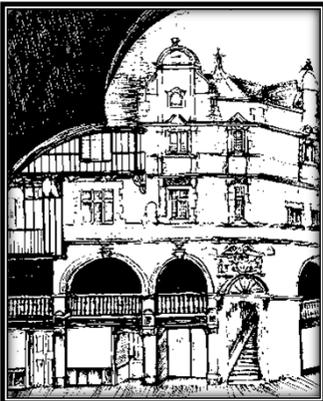
A little further along is the narrow entrance to Pierpoint Lane, where you will find the **Dewa Roman Experience**. This is a great place to discover more about life in Roman Chester.

On the right-hand side of Bridge Street is number 39, now home to Bridge Cafe & Bistro. Here you can find the remains of a **Roman hypocaust** (underfloor heating system) dating back to the 2nd century.



Continue along the street, passing the impressive half-timbered facade of **St Michael's Buildings** on your right, with their wide steps leading up to Row level. It wasn't always like this though. Now forming an entrance to the Grosvenor shopping centre, it was constructed in 1910 and was originally faced with tiles. The good folk of Chester were not impressed and the following year due to public pressure the facade was replaced by what we see today. Look at the lower shops either side of the steps, where the original tiles still exist.

A little further along, this time on your left, we have another example of 17<sup>th</sup> century architecture, the **Dutch Houses** at numbers 20-24. They were originally built in 1670 and were restored in the 1970s. Sticking to the left-hand side and **Cowper House** lies a few metres ahead. It was built in 1664 by former Mayor of Chester Thomas Cowper, but like many of Bridge Street's buildings, its stone cellars, known as undercrofts, are medieval.



As we again reach the heart of the city at the Cross, the entrance to Bridge Street is flanked by two late 19<sup>th</sup> century buildings, both designed by TM Lockwood, who was one of the leading architects of Chester's black & white revival. Both incorporate steps up to Row level, with the building to your right, 1 Bridge Street, being one of the most photographed in Chester.

At the Cross, turn right into Eastgate

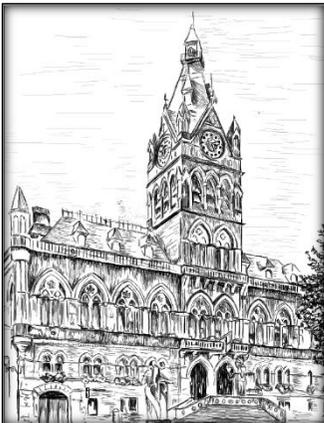
Street, Chester's principal shopping street. We are again flanked by the Rows and ahead in the distance is the Eastgate, with its iconic clock. Head towards the Eastgate, taking your time to admire the eclectic mix of buildings that make up the street today.

A few gems to point out include the buildings on your left now occupied by Beaverbrooks, EE and Fat Face, which are the work of TM Lockwood, with later extensions by his sons, while opposite is the **Crypt Building**, a great example of Victorian Gothic Revival. This was once part of Browns of Chester, a renowned department store established in the late 18th century.

Coming up on your right, a little way before the Eastgate is the exclusive **Grosvenor Hotel**, built in the 1860s by TM Penson, who is credited with pioneering the Tudor revival style in Chester. Penson sadly died before it was completed, but his younger brother completed the work.

Opposite the hotel, turn right into St Werburgh Street. The group buildings on your right, numbers **2 – 18 St Werburgh Street**, are yet another classic example of Chester's black & white revival, this time by John Douglas.

Keeping the Cathedral to your right, walk along St Werburgh's Street, passing by what is now the rear entrance to Superdrug on your left. This building has had various uses and alterations, but is perhaps best known as the **Music Hall**, a guise it wore from the 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), cloth hall and later a theatre.



You are now greeted by Belfast architect William Henry Lynn's magnificent **Town Hall**. Opened in 1869 by the future King Edward VII, the building takes its inspiration from the medieval Cloth Hall in the Flemish city of Ypres. No longer used as an administrative HQ, the Town Hall hosts weddings and events, plus of course Chester's Visitor Information Centre.

Price £1



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