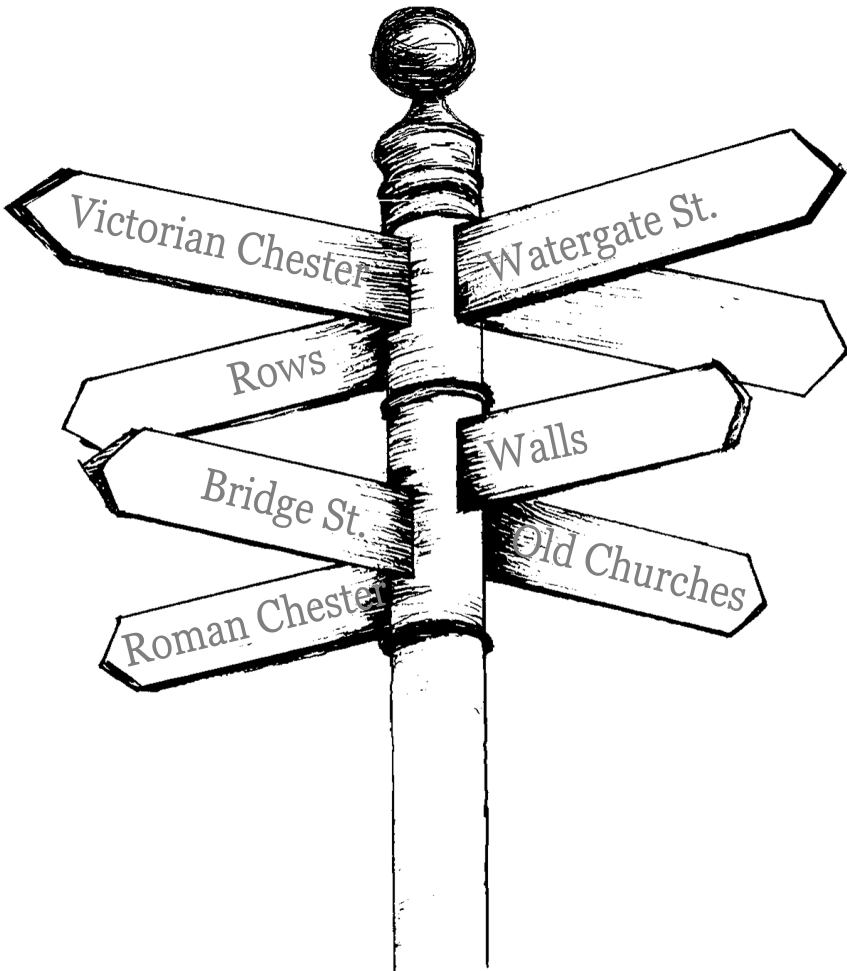


Chester's Old Churches

Chester

Our Guide



Visitor Information Centre Team

“Our series of friendly Guides written and illustrated during lockdown by the team here at the Visitor Information Centre to give you a warm welcome to our much-loved City of Chester”.

VIC Team

Christianity has played an important role in the life of the city for much of Chester's long history. Tradition says that the church of St John the Baptist was founded in AD 689, while the later medieval city was home to nine parishes alongside an abbey and several friaries.

This short tour of a little over 1.5 miles (2.5km) will take you to all the existing churches whose establishment predates the 16th century English Reformation. Some are still very active Anglican churches, while others have found themselves playing new roles in more recent years. Along the way we will also discover a few of the city's later churches, illustrating the changing nature of religious practice in Chester.

Our Walk

Our Walk starts at the **Visitor Information Centre** and we begin by heading across the Town Hall Square towards **Chester Cathedral**.

As you walk towards the cathedral, look a little to your left, where you will see the red sandstone arch called the Abbey Gateway. Dating from around 1300 (the upper storey was rebuilt around 1800), its name gives away its original use. In the medieval period, what we now know as Chester Cathedral



was in fact the Benedictine Abbey of St Werburgh. Chester did have an earlier cathedral, but that was across the city at the church of St John the Baptist, which we will visit a little later.

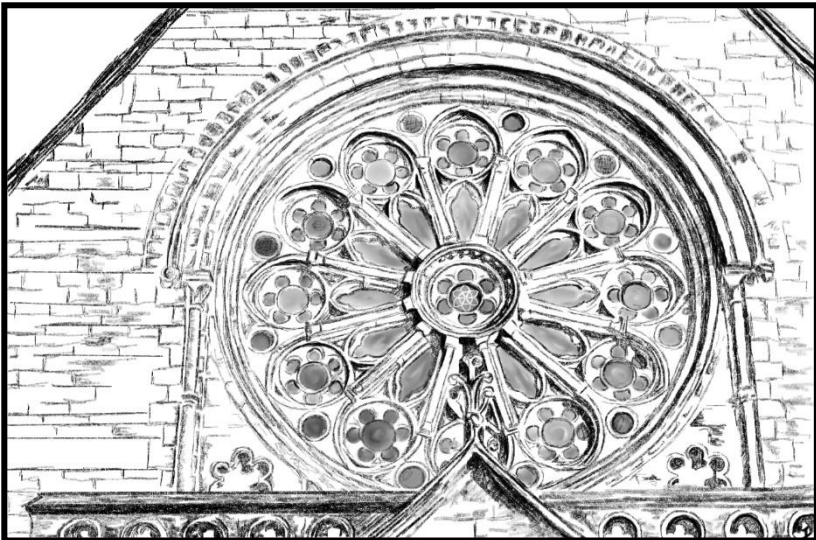
The abbey was established in the late 11th century, following the Norman conquest and the present cathedral was built as the abbey's church. The Reformation in the 1530s saw the dissolution of the monasteries, including the abbey. However, it soon

took on a new life as a cathedral, becoming the seat of the new Bishop of Chester in 1541.

A detailed account of what you can discover inside the cathedral is way beyond the scope of this guide, but you should certainly save time during your visit to Chester to explore its rich history.

Keeping the cathedral on your left, walk along St Werburgh Street, passing by what is now the rear entrance to Superdrug on your right. This building has seen 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 the Common Hall (a forerunner of the town hall), wool market, and later a theatre.

Continue along St Werburgh Street and where it meets Eastgate Street (Chester's principal shopping street), turn left and pass under the famous clock that stands above the Eastgate then take the right turn into St John Street. Halfway along the street on the left is the **Welsh Presbyterian Church**. Opened in 1866, its front is yellow sandstone and contrasts with the brick-built remainder. The city once boasted five Welsh speaking churches



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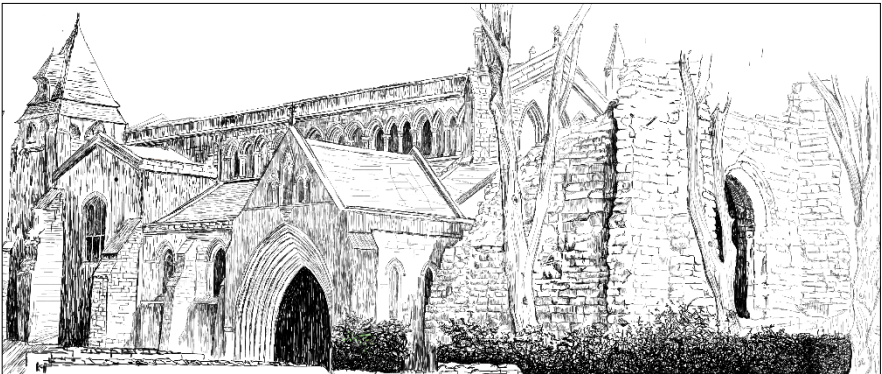
or chapels, but this church is now home to the sole remaining Welsh speaking congregation in Chester.

A Little further down on the opposite side of the street is the **Wesley Methodist Church**. Originally built in 1811, major alterations in the early 20th century saw the entrance switch from the west to the present east side. The church is still very active and hosts popular music recitals.

At the southern end of St John Street is the inner ring road and the Roman amphitheatre. To the left you will see the church of **St John the Baptist**, a little way beyond the amphitheatre. There is a pedestrian crossing opposite the church, so stroll round and cross to the building's North Porch and certainly find time to peek inside.

St John's is reputed to date back to the late 7th century and became a cathedral 400 years later, 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.

The exterior of the building holds many clues to its life over the centuries. The ruins at the east end show where it was shortened in the 16th century, while the western end has the base of the collapsed Northwest Tower, which fell during the rebuilding of the church in the late 19th century.



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In 1644-6, during the English Civil War, Royalist Chester was under siege by Parliamentary forces. St John's, being outside the city walls, was used as a gun platform to bombard the city's defenders.

From St John's, take the walkway that cuts across the remains of the Roman amphitheatre and head towards the Newgate, the impressive red sandstone arch that provides an entrance through the city walls. Walk through the Newgate, turn left, and a set of steps can be found built into the gate, giving you access to the city walls. Once on the walls, there is the opportunity stand on top of the Newgate and to look at St John's from a different perspective. To the right of the amphitheatre, and covering much of its still hidden southern half, is **Dee House**. A combination of Georgian and Victorian gothic architecture, its future has been a thorny issue in the city for many years. Its past is less controversial and includes a period spent as an Ursuline convent.

Once you have taken in the view, head south along the city wall, with Park Street and the black & white timber framed 'Nine Houses' on your right. Only six of the nine remain, but there is a little bit of ecclesiastical history hiding in plain sight. The houses lie on the boundary between the ancient parishes of St Olave and St Michael. Can you spot the boundary markers?

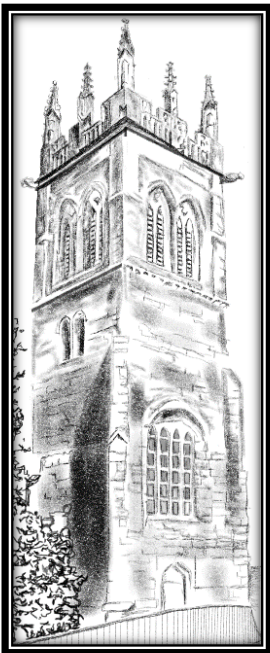
Just beyond the Nine Houses, you will see the side of the **Welsh Congregational Chapel**, whose entrance lies on Albion Street. Once another of Chester's Welsh language places of worship, it is now divided into apartments.

Take the steps down from the wall at the end of park street and turn right into Duke Street. Walk along the street, with the tower of St Mary's church visible over the rooftops ahead. Duke Street ends where it meets Lower Bridge Street. Turn right up Lower

Bridge Street and, immediately after the now redundant concrete car dealership from the 1960s on your right, you will 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 Norway's patron saint since the 11th century. As its name implies, this was once the heart of Chester's Viking quarter. The church is currently redundant and there is no access to the interior.



Just across Lower Bridge Street from St Olave's is Castle Street, with Ye Olde King's Head inn on the corner. Head along the street, once the main approach to Chester Castle, until you reach the Golden Eagle pub on your right. Opposite is St Mary's Hill, leading to the **Church of St Mary-on-the-Hill**, whose tower we glimpsed from Duke Street earlier. Originally built to serve the castle, the present structure has medieval origins although it has been altered over the centuries, including being restored twice in the 19th century. The building is now known as St Mary's Creative Space and is a popular venue for art and cultural events.



From the Golden Eagle pub head westwards towards the castle, which lies just ahead. Founded in 1070, shortly after the Norman Conquest, the castle was comprehensively remodelled some 200 years ago

in the Greek Revival style. Look ahead beyond the castle car park and in the left-hand corner you will see the 13th century Agricola Tower rising above its neoclassical neighbours. This is the largest surviving fragment of the medieval castle and contains the chapel of **St Mary de Castro** on its first floor. 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.

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.

As you turn the corner into Grosvenor Street, facing you is the **St Francis of Assisi RC Church**. Completed in the 1870s, it is served by the Franciscan order and is still very active, offering services in Polish as well as English.

Continue along Grosvenor Street until it ends at the junction with Bridge Street/Pepper Street. This junction was once the site of **St Bridget's**, one of the city's lost medieval churches. The construction of Grosvenor Street in the 1820s led to the church's demolition. A new St Bridget's was built opposite the castle, but later suffered the same fate as its predecessor.

Facing you across the junction on the corner of Bridge Street and Pepper Street is **St Michael's**, another of Chester's ancient parish churches. There has been a church on the site since at least the 12th century and the present building contains later medieval stonework. Like many other churches it was heavily restored in the 19th century, but the old archway from the west door still survives – albeit a few minutes' walk away in Grosvenor Park, where it stands alongside other features relocated from elsewhere in the city. Declared redundant in 1972, three years later the church became Britain's first heritage centre and is now home to 'Sick to Death', an interactive attraction looking at public health through the ages.

From St Michael's a quick detour along Pepper Street will give you a great view of the elegant neoclassical facade of the former

Methodist Chapel that lies on the opposite (south) side of Pepper Street. Built in the 1830s it served as a church until the early 20th century, later becoming a garage. The original facade was then hidden behind more recent developments until it was revealed again in the 1980s. The building is now the Opera Bar & Grill. A little way further along the north side of Pepper Street is Newgate Street and tucked away on the left-hand side of this short street is the former **St Andrews United Reformed Church**. Built in 1860, it is now a popular bar simply called 'The Church'.

From St Michael's cross to the opposite (west) side of Bridge Street and take the cobbled street called White Friars, next to Caffe Nero. This street's name gives a big clue to its origins, taking its name from the Carmelite monks (known as White Friars) who had a friary close by until the dissolution of the monasteries in the late 1530s. Other streets not too far away are named Black Friars and Grey Friars after the Dominicans and Franciscans respectively, who both had friaries in medieval Chester.

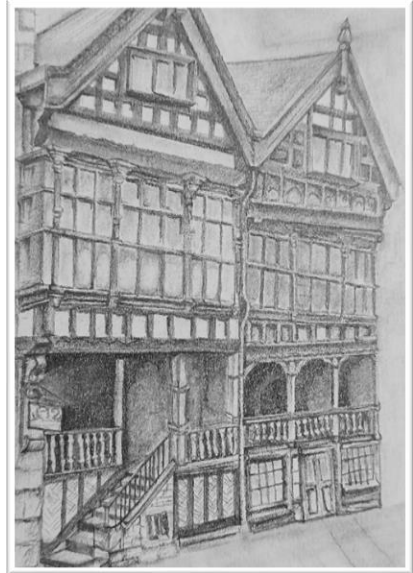
As you walk along White Friars, the site of the old friary lay on the right (north) side of the street and the land is now occupied by the Georgian building called 'The Friars', set well back from the street in its own grounds.

At the end of White Friars, turn right into Weaver Street and head north. Now a quiet and little visited street, it is one of Chester's old lanes and probably follows the line of a Roman street. It also formed the western boundary of the Carmelite Friary. As you walk along the street a church spire becomes clearly visible ahead of you. This is **Holy Trinity Church** and lies on Watergate Street. To reach it, continue to where Weaver Street's northern end meets Watergate Street at 'Ye Olde Custom House' pub. Now the home of 'The Guild Bar', the original church on the site dated to the 12th century. The current building was constructed in the 1860s, but it closed its doors in 1960 and later

became the Guildhall, the meeting place of the Freemen and Guilds of the City of Chester.

Walk eastwards along Watergate Street towards the centre of the city. Now an atmospheric street and a great place to view Chester's famous 'Rows' (double decker shopping streets, dating back to the late 13th century), it led from the heart of the city to a thriving medieval port.

As you walk along Watergate Street, look at some of its finest half-timbered buildings on the right. **Bishop Lloyd's House** soon comes along. Also known as Bishop Lloyds Palace, this impressive house started life as two separate houses and has seen numerous alterations, including a restoration at the end of the 19th century. The facade is divided into square panels filled with intricately carved heraldic symbols and religious history. George Lloyd served as Bishop of Chester from 1605 until his death 10 years later.



Near the eastern end of Watergate Street sits **God's Providence House**. It is named for its inscription reading: '*Gods providence is mine inheritance*', which is said to be thanks for keeping everyone in the building safe from the pestilence of 1647-8 that ravaged the city shortly after the civil war siege.

A little further along, on the opposite (north) side of the street, lies **St Peter's Church**. Sitting at the Cross, the meeting place of Chester's main streets since the days when the Roman fortress of Deva stood here, the original church on this site is said to date from AD 907. The current building is medieval with later additions. Another very active church, it is a popular spot to take

a moment for a relaxing cuppa and slice of cake while admiring its interior.

From St Peter's, turn left into Northgate Street which leads back to the Town Hall, where your tour began.

We hope you have enjoyed your walk around Chester's oldest existing churches and some later ones along the way. There are of course many others within easy walking distance too. Here are a few others close by:

East from the Cross:

Welsh Methodist Chapel, Queen Street, 1884 (now Festival Church)*

Independent Chapel, Queen Street, 1838 (facade only)

St Werburgh's RC, Grosvenor Park Road, 1873*

Zion Chapel, Grosvenor Park Road, 1879*

English Presbyterian Church of Wales, City Road, 1864

North from the Cross:

Northgate Church, Upper Northgate Street, 1874*

St Thomas of Canterbury, Parkgate Road, 1872*

Welsh Baptist Chapel, Gorse Stacks, 1893

Handbridge:

St Andrews United Reformed Church, Handbridge, 1860*

St Mary-Without-the-Walls, Overleigh Road, 1885*

West Chapel, Overleigh Cemetery, 1904 (now St Barbara's Greek Orthodox Church)*

* *Still an active church*

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