

Tactile Self-Guided Tour of Chester

This trail is designed to help you explore Chester in a hands-on way, stopping to feel the tangible history around you.

We've also recruited some animal friends to help us find our way. Let's go!

Checkpoint 1 New Chester Market: The Boar

We start in Exchange Square, standing outside New Chester Market. Chester has had a permanent market since at least the 12th century, but this new market opened in 2022.

It's here we find a 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. The boar was strong and fierce — just like the legion who claimed Chester for the Roman Empire.

Feel the boar's spiky back. He's a reminder that the market is built on the barracks of the Roman military stronghold of Deva, as Chester was once known.

Checkpoint 2 Town Hall Gates: Snails

Carefully climb the steps to stand outside the main gates of Chester Town Hall, built in 1869 in the time of Queen Victoria. The steel-and-bronze gates, built by the sculptor Terrence Clark, were installed in 1992 to mark Chester receiving Lord Mayoralty status from Queen Elizabeth II.

But can you find the tactile animals craved into the iron? Three of them, in fact.

As a young apprentice, Clark was criticised for being a slow worker. Ever since, he cheekily carved snails into his artistic creations. Besides, snails are important animals. The Aztecs saw the snail as a sacred for their shell represented the cycle of life; ancient Greeks worshipped Nerites, the god of snails and shellfish; and the Chinese gave snails as symbols of love.

That's Valentine's Day sorted then.

Checkpoint 3 Janya: The Elephant

Crossing Town Hall Square, a little elephant friend awaits. This is Janya, the Hindu name meaning "life". Janya reminds us of an important man in Chester's history: George Mottershead.

In 1930, George, recovering from the trauma of the Great War, bought a house and land just outside Chester, promising to open "a zoo without bars". The new lord of the manor bought animals from his family farm in east Cheshire and went about creating a haven for exotic beasts, celebrating the power of animals and nature to soothe the human soul.

Chester Zoo opened its gates in 1931 and is now the most visited zoo in Britain with around 20,000 animals and 2m visitors per year. Chester Zoo gifted the sculpture of Janya to the city in 2010 and Janya reminds us daily of George's nature-loving vision. Give little Janya a pat. There's another miracle waiting for us around the corner...

Checkpoint 4 Cathedral War Memorial: Goose

Walk right along the facade of Chester Cathedral, built post Norman-Conquest and first established as a monastery, to the war memorial in the gardens near the South Transept. High up on the cold stone is a saintly vision of Werburgh, the Mercian princess turned holy sister and goose botherer, who is Chester's patron saint with her feast day on February 3.

Werburgh's relics are believed to have come from Staffordshire around 900AD, saving them from Viking raiders. The bones helped to establish Chester as a key destination for pilgrims. Werburgh's shrine was dismantled after the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII in the 1540s and later reconstructed in the Lady Chapel during Victorian reconstruction works of the 1860s. She's still there today. And, if you pop into the Cathedral gift shop, you'll find modern-day pilgrim badges for sale, featuring a gaggle of her miraculous geese.

Stained-glass windows in the Cathedral depict tales of her miracles, notably the resurrection of her favourite goose, Grayking, who stands at her feet. After the much-loved bird was taken from his flock for the cooking pot, Werburgh is said to have gathered the bones and resurrected him. Touch the stone and have a gander.

Checkpoint **5** Eastgate Clock: Lions

Walk down St Werburgh Street and stand below the great symbol of Chester, the Eastgate Clock. The wrought-iron clock, the most photographed in Britain after London's Big Ben, is marked with the words VR 1987 — the diamond jubilee of Queen Victoria. She was crowned aged just 18 in 1838 and our longest-serving queen until Elizabeth II.

During Victoria's time, Eastgate St was compared favourably to London's Regent Street with the nearby department store, Browns of Chester (later Debenhams) known as the 'Harrods of the North'. The architect T. M. Penson designed its Gothic crypt in 1858, catalysing Chester's architectural revival.

But long before the Victorian heyday, the sandstone Eastgate was the main entrance to the city for the incoming Roman army. You can feel the full 2,000-year history of Chester at this spot.

Atop the clock is a cupola with rampant lions on a red background. They're not for petting but you can still feel the old hooks and frames set into the right-hand side. Chester's history is still tangible.

Checkpoint **6** Watergate Street: Rats

Follow the cold, marbled columns outside the Grosvenor Hotel and head along Eastgate Street towards the High Cross. We're headed towards Watergate Street and a famous black and white timbered building in Chester: God's Providence House, which you will find on your left.

There are no rats to be seen today but, in the 1300s, the rats from ships at the nearby port of Chester brought plague to the city. It came in waves multiple times until the Civil War siege of Chester of 1645-46.

Plague-ravaged cities of the Middle Ages would have been stalked by plague doctors, who wore a beak-like mask filled with aromatic herbs; men employed as watchmen for nightwalkers trying to escape confinement; and bellmen making a nightly round to collect bodies for the plague pits, calling out, "Bring out your dead."

But the family living at God's Providence House were smart. While every other family on the street perished, this family stockpiled supplies and locked themselves away, ensuring they were the only ones to survive the plague. That's why that façade of the building is marked with words of celebration: 'God's Providence is Mine Inheritance'.

Checkpoint **7** The High Cross: Cockerel

We're standing at the High Cross, where the four main Roman streets of the city meet. This was once the marketplace and a place of public retribution during the Middle Ages.

The black-and-white corner buildings here are quintessentially Chester, built by the architect T. M. Lockwood in the late 1800s. He built the first ornate group on one corner and the Duke of Westminster liked them so much he then bankrolled Lockwood to build the others. Today, these buildings are famous — they even featured on a 7p postage stamps for the European Architectural Heritage Year 1975.

Touch the hard stone of the obelisk. It was lost during the English Civil War but reinstalled here following pedestrianisation in the early Seventies. And, if seeking an animal friend, then follow the façade of St Peter's Church upwards to spot the cockerel on the weathervane.

In summer, Chester's town crier still stands on this spot to deliver the daily proclamation. All together now: "Oyez, oyez".

Checkpoint **8** Godstall Lane: Little Yellow Pig

We finish our tactile stroll through 2,000 years of Chester history on Godstall Lane, one of the few remaining medieval lanes in the city. The Rows, the covered galleries at first-floor level dating from the Middle Ages, lead us here with the left turn coming just after The Boot, the pub dating from the time of the English Civil War.

Godstall Lane is said to be named after an ancient hermit, who was believed to live near this spot, and is today known as the most Insta-friendly street in Chester. Stop and soak up the atmosphere here. People have walked this way for some 800 years.

You've earned a snack, too. So, check out our final animal friends with a coffee at the Yellow Pig Café, or a milkshake around the corner at the Funky Cow. Chester is easy on the eye but also tangible to see Chester a new way.

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