

The No-Steps Self-Guided Tour of The Rows

The Rows are Chester's crowning glory. The covered galleries at first-floor level date from the Middle Ages and have been part of Chester's history for more than 800 years.

What's more, the unique, three-tiered design makes Chester a world beater — nowhere else in the world has Rows. That's Chester one, rest of world nil, then.

Checkpoint 1 Town Hall Square

Start outside the Visitor Information Centre.

From this spot, you can see how Chester's 2,000-year history remains tangible with the Victorian grandeur of the Town Hall and the Gothic-revival Cathedral opposite from the Norman period.

Follow the smooth pavements down St Werburgh Street, running along the front of The Cathedral. On the way, you'll pass the modern-day Superdrug shop. This previously served as a music hall and cinema. Charles Dickens is just one of the famous names to have performed here in the 19th century.

Just to the right, there's a small passageway with a large, ornate metal sign which reads: "Godstall Lane" — this is your entrance to The Rows.

Checkpoint 2 Godstall Lane

This attractive passageway is steeped in history as one of the just a handful of medieval lanes that survive in the city today. The name refers to 'God's Place', an old folk tale of a hermit who once lived near here in the 12th Century.

The passageway leads directly onto the Rows. You can see the three-tier design, comprising the undercroft, or crypt, used as storeroom, the row level at first floor, where much of the trading took place, and the solar, or upper living quarters at the top.

The section of Rows to your right, when you enter from Godstall Lane, was once known as the 'Dark Row' for its unsavoury reputation as a haven for thieves, vagabonds, and ne'er-do-wells. This reputation was cemented even further with the 1640s opening of The Boot Inn public house — these days, it's just a good place for a pint.

Now retrace your route back down Godstall Lane and turn right down St Werburgh Street. The famous Eastgate Clock is next.

Checkpoint 3 Grosvenor Shopping Arcade

The Eastgate Clock was installed to mark the Diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria. It's a symbol of Chester's wealth and status in the Victorian era; the city having enjoyed a tourism boom since the arrival of the railway in the mid 1800s and developed a reputation for fine dining and shopping. But it sits on the Eastgate itself, formerly the main entrance to the Roman city of Deva (as Chester was known in Roman times).

Photo opportunity complete, cross Eastgate Street and enter the Grosvenor Shopping Centre. There's a wide, flat entrance to the side of the Grosvenor Hotel, the best address in town. Lots of famous people have stayed here over the years, including the French fashion designer Coco Chanel, who enjoyed what we could describe as 'a close friendship' with Hugh Grosvenor, the second Duke of Westminster.

Follow the flat route and head towards the Edwardian elegance of St Michaels' Arcade, leading onto Bridge Street Row. This section was redeveloped as a shopping arcade by order of the second Duke in 1910. The original Edwardian-baroque design, with its white and gold tiles, was widely criticised for not fitting into the picturesque character of the historic Rows. So, in 1911, the duke himself paid to have it reworked in the black-and-white style you see today. There are stairs down to Bridge Street, a lift down to street level by TK Maxx to the rear of the shopping centre, or you can retrace your steps to rejoin Eastgate at street level.

Checkpoint 4 Pierpoint Lane

From here, we head back onto the Rows.

Look for an ancient, narrow passageway, Pierpoint Lane. You'll see the Deva Roman Experience ahead, a visitor attraction where costumed performers recreate scenes from Roman Chester. The ramp here leads back up to Row level.

There's an interesting stretch of the Rows to explore here, leading to Three Old Arches. This is said to be the oldest surviving shopfront in England, dating from the 13th century. Why three arches? In the Middle Ages, few people could read or write, so if you wanted to sell your goods, then you'd have to actively display them, of course!

Checkpoint 5 Watergate Row South

Backtrack along the Row past the ramp and continue onwards towards the Cross, turning left on Watergate Street Row South. You'll pass a café-bar with a Turkish motif, Pars Kahve. The next stretch takes in three of Chester's finest old timber-framed buildings: God's Providence House, Leche House and Bishop Lloyd's Palace.

God's Providence House (now Harriet and Dee on the upper Row), built in 1652 and rebuilt in the mid 1800s by the architect Thomas Harrison, is particularly famous in Chester for its association with plague. Plague had been a regular visitor with a spike following the siege of Chester during the English Civil War. Around one third of the population died from plague during this time.

But the family who lived at the house we now know as God's Providence House locked themselves away with their supplies — we call it self-isolation today. By keeping their home apart from the community, they were the only family on Watergate Street to survive plague, hence the slogan lives on in Chester's memory. It reads: 'God's Providence is Mine Inheritance'.

Checkpoint 6 Watergate Row North

Your journey will see you leave the Rows just before Bishop Lloyd's Palace, taking the narrow passageway to the left. The passageway leads towards Weaver Street, turn right and then take the first right at the bottom of the road where you rejoin Watergate Street at ground level by Ye Olde Custom House pub. Cross over and head back up Watergate Street towards The Cross.

You will pass Booth Mansion, the grandest house on the street. This building is a symbol of Chester's Georgian renaissance as a fashionable place for the winter season. If you're a fan of Jane Austen's 1813 novel *Pride and Prejudice*, then you can look up to the top-floor ballroom and imagine dastardly Mr. Darcy, the romantic interest of Elizabeth Bennet, throwing a few shapes on the dancefloor.

Shortly afterwards, take the narrow lane to the left, Goss Street, and find the ramp leading back up to Row level. Watergate Street North has fine views across the street that originally lead to the Roman harbour and, later, the long-lost trading port of Chester — hence the fine merchant houses on this street.

Checkpoint 7 The Cross

Take the same ramp back down to street level, leaving the Rows behind for now. As you head back up towards The Cross, where the four main Roman streets of the city meet, the ancient parish church of St Peter's, located on the left, sits on the site of the Roman Principia, or headquarters.

This little square, now pedestrianised, was the site of the market and a place of public retribution in the Middle Ages. It's also where the Town Crier would ring his bell, call out, "Oyez, oyez," and deliver a daily proclamation of news.

And, if you're visiting from June to early September, then you'll spot our current Town Crier, a tradition revived in the Seventies, delivering a midday proclamation.

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