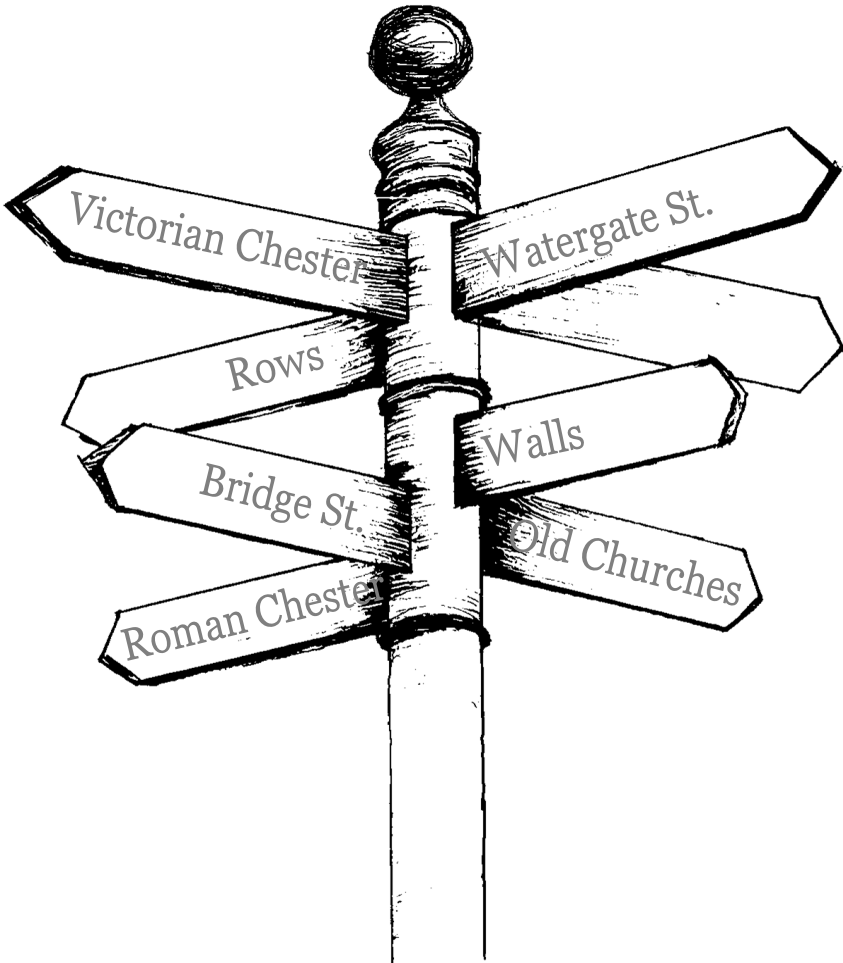


Bridge Street

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

For any Visitor to Chester who has time constraints, a lovely idea is a stroll down Bridge Street on to Lower Bridge Street and through the Bridgegate to view the River Dee. This route is not only charming, but it also answers many questions about the city's long history. For any Visitor without time constraints, lucky you! Whatever time you have, enjoy our short guide to Bridge Street.

The Romans knew Bridge Street as Via Praetoria and it was one of the four original streets of the Roman fortress of Deva, leading to the Roman South Gate and a bridge across the river. It is now a feast for the eyes, a fascinating street filled with characterful shops and eating places, many of which spill outside providing alfresco dining while you take in the history around you. There are upper and lower sections for Bridge Street, each with a distinctive character and history that makes the street an interesting place to shop, eat and explore.



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A Little Bit of History

Bridge Street's history begins with the Romans, who laid out a route leading from the crossing point of the river to the heart of the fortress. During the medieval period, the upper part of Bridge Street was home to Chester's markets and the street remained the route from the city into North Wales until the 19th century. Bridge Street remains one of the best areas to view the ancient Rows, the unique galleries that lie along Chester's main thoroughfares and whose origins date back to the late 13th century. (A separate guide to the Rows is also available).

Bridge street suffered, like others in the city, during the siege of Chester. An episode of the English Civil War in the 1640s, the city, which was still an important port, remained loyal to King Charles and was besieged by Parliamentary forces for 16 months. In the 18th century, prosperous Georgian merchants turned to brick for the facades of their houses, while in the late 19th and early 20th century, Bridge Street became the home of some of Chester's finest examples of vernacular revival, including the black & white half-timbered frontages that are often thought of as 'classic Chester'.

Today, the upper part of the street is a busy shopping street and a showcase for Chester's rich history, with Roman remains and medieval shop fronts nestling alongside fabulous examples from later centuries. Lower Bridge Street is quieter and home to 17th and 18th century former town houses, many of which enjoy the 21st century as pubs & inns. Its Rows are long enclosed, but clues to their former existence remain - if you know where to look.

The Walk



Your walk will begin at the Cross, where the four original streets of Chester meet. This has been the site of many public proclamations since the 15th century, a tradition carried on by today's Town Crier. The High Cross itself was destroyed by Parliamentary soldiers following the siege of Chester but was restored to its rightful place in 1975. It features the original head and several other fragments that were rescued after Cromwell's troops had left their mark.

The entrance to Bridge Street is flanked by two late 19th century buildings, both designed by Chester based architect TM Lockwood. Both have steps up to the Rows, with the building on the Eastern side (on your left as you walk away from the Cross) being one of the most photographed in Chester.

A little further down the street on your right is no.12, known as Cowper House. 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.

A Little further down on the right we have another example of 17th century architecture, the Dutch Houses at numbers 20-24. They were originally built in 1670 and were restored in the 1970s.

Continue strolling down the street until you see the impressive half-timbered facade of St Michael's Buildings on your left, with their wide steps leading up to Row level. It was not always like this though... Now forming an entrance to the Grosvenor shopping centre, it was constructed in 1910 by the sons of TM Lockwood (who we met earlier) 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 the current black and white example. Look at the lower shops either side of the steps, where the original tiles still exist. It really is magnificent and demonstrates the multiple layers of Chester's history. Stand back and look at this half-timbered revival building constructed in the Edwardian period above medieval undercrofts – all in a street first walked by Roman soldiers!



A little further along to the left is 39 Bridge Street, now home to Bridge Cafe & Bistro, where you can find the remains of a Roman hypocaust (under floor heating system) dating back to the

2nd century that was used to heat the Roman Baths. Keep walking and on your right, you will see the Three old arches where the JoJo Maman Bebe store is. This is one of the earliest surviving shop fronts in England, dating back to the 13th century.

On the left-hand side, just before the pedestrian crossing to take you to Lower Bridge Street, is St Michael's Church. The former Church is the last building at Row level accessed by a flight of steps. A church has stood on the site since the 12th century and the present building contains work from several periods of Chester's history. During the siege of Chester, the church was used as a prison and it was rebuilt by James Harrison in 1849. It became a heritage centre, the first in Britain, in 1975 and is soon to be another attraction for the city. Another example on Bridge street of the layering of history as the Church sits on the site of the Eastern abutment of the Roman South Gate.

Bridge Street now meets Pepper Street and Grosvenor Street, the latter being the first street to make a major alteration to the city's ancient street plan. Opened in 1829, it provided a new route into North Wales, leading to Lower Bridge Street becoming a quieter part of the city.

Pepper Street & Grosvenor Street now form part of the inner ring road, splitting Bridge Street neatly in two at the same point as the South Gate to the Roman fortress. Pedestrian crossings are provided to help you safely cross to what is now known as Lower Bridge Street, though please take extra care as unlike the upper part of Bridge Street, it is not pedestrianised.

On your right is the Falcon Inn, a black and white timber framed pub with an enclosed Row. The original building was medieval, but in 1643 Sir Richard Grosvenor extensively rebuilt it to use as his family's town house. It was at this stage the Row was enclosed, a move that inspired other property owners and eventually resulted in the almost total loss of the Rows in Lower Bridge Street. The Falcon is now a popular pub and well worth a stop on your journey down lower Bridge street, although we will of course meet several old pubs as we head downhill towards the river.



A little further down on your right you will discover Oddfellows' Hall (originally known as Bridge House) which was built in 1676 for Lady Mary Calverley who had petitioned to demolish her existing house. The neo-classical style mansion, with a later Edwardian ground floor extension, is now a boutique hotel after a period as a school and later the Oddfellows' Lodge.

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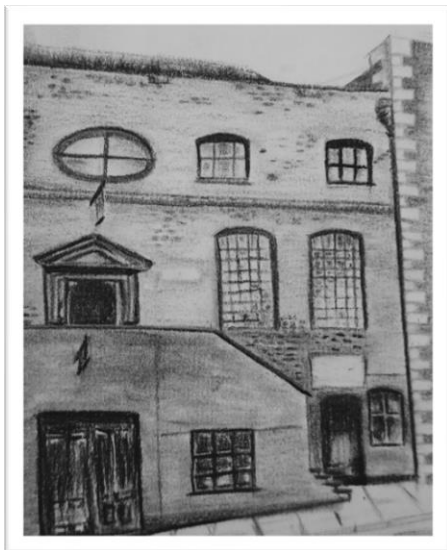
Opposite is No 11, the sole surviving section of the Rows on Lower Bridge Street.

Also on the left-hand side is Tudor House which also had the portion of the Row at street level enclosed and it now forms part of the first floor. The date above the doorway says 1503 but in all probability is an error as it has been dated to the early 17th century, so it is around a hundred years younger than claimed and just sneaks into the very end of the Tudor period. It was originally built for a wealthy merchant showing again how important trade was to Chester. The building has been used in more modern times as a café and shop but currently stands empty, awaiting another chapter.

A little further along on your left stands Park House, a classic early Georgian town house built around 1717. In 1818, it was converted into the Albion Hotel, which counted the Duke of Wellington among its guests only a few years after Waterloo. At its rear were Chester's first public gardens which were closed in 1865 after the development of Grosvenor Park in the city.

Continue your journey down lower Bridge Street and you will find to your right The Old Kings Head inn, sitting on the corner of Castle Street. First mentioned in 1208 as private house, it has seen many alterations since, becoming an inn in 1717 (Maybe the builders of Park House, a little further up on the opposite side of the street, were some of its first patrons?) During renovations in 1935 a sword was found hidden under the floorboards of bedroom number 4, which can now be found decorating the bar. The building is also famed as one of Chester's most haunted, with a phantom child among the spirits said to roam its ancient rooms & stairways.

Just beyond the entrance to Castle Street is Gamul House. Behind the brick facade lies a medieval open hall, the facade being added in the late 17th century after the Great Fire of London (1666) saw architectural fashions change as early building regulations were adopted. During the Civil War, the house was home to prominent Royalist Sir Francis Gamul and played host to King Charles I in September 1645, who watched his army's defeat at the Battle of Rowton Moor a few miles east of the city. The building now is home to the Brewery Tap bar, whose entrance is up the steps at the level of the former Row.



Opposite Gamul House lies St Olaves church, which was founded in the 11th century.

Its Nordic name gives a clue that this was once a part of Chester settled by Vikings. The present church building dates from 1611 and was restored by James Harrison in 1849.

The Bridgegate can be clearly seen ahead. The present structure dates from 1781 and forms part of the city walls. A little uphill from the Bridgegate and on your right you will Ye Old Edgar, once a picturesque old inn. This sits only a few yards from the Bear and Billet. Built in 1664 as a townhouse for the Earl of Shrewsbury before becoming an inn in the 18th century, the pub is also known as the birthplace of John Lennon's Grandmother. Opposite, on the left-hand side are fine Georgian terraces and the Cross Keys pub – an unmistakably Victorian structure

providing a contrast to Lower Bridge Street's half-timbered watering holes.

The Bridgegate completes our walk and leads to the Old Dee Bridge, the oldest bridge in the city. Why not continue cross the river at this point. Once over the river into Handbridge turn around and then it is possible to really appreciate Bridge street and its route into the city. Through the centuries the busy river made a Chester prosperous centre for trade, maybe difficult to imagine now when looking at the pleasure boat trips and couples strolling along the river front. Alternatively, why not stroll along the Groves, Chester's riverside promenade, or perhaps join the city wall at the Bridgegate.



Price £1



@Chester01244

welcome@chestervic.co.uk

www.visitcheshire.com

Tel: 01244405340

VIC Team