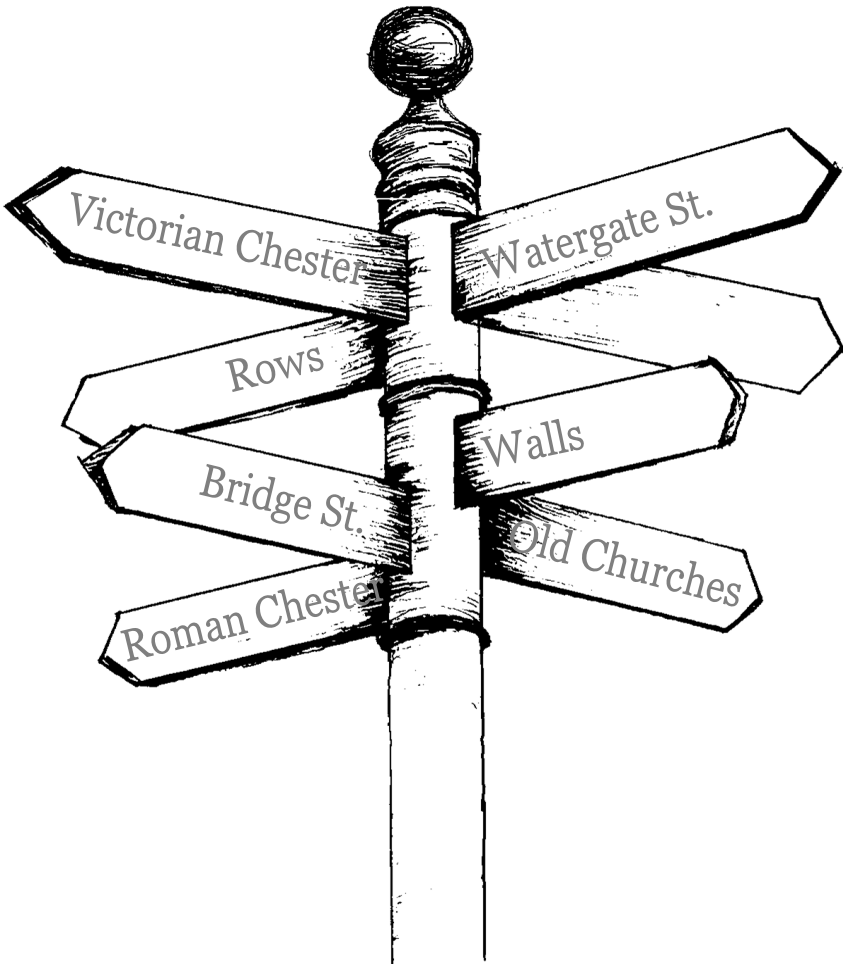


Roman Chester

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

In common with many other places in Britain with the words chester, cester or caster in their name, the city we now call Chester was once home to a Roman *castrum* or military fort. For over 300 years the legionary fortress of Deva, the largest in Roman Britain, stood where Chester now stands. Its influence is still felt 1600 years after the Romans departed and this short guide will help you discover more about Deva and its continuing legacy.

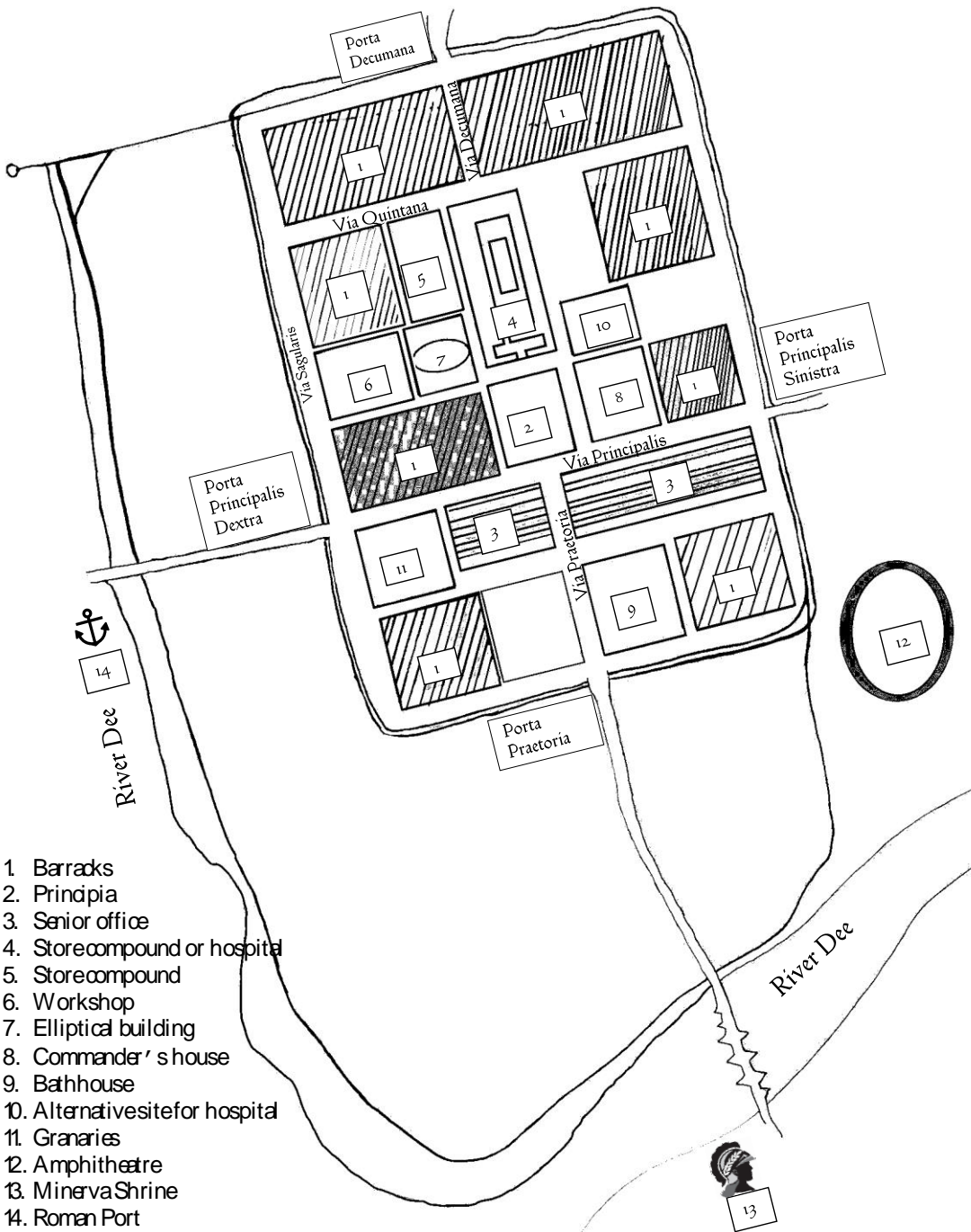
Why were the Romans in Britain?

Julius Caesar mounted expeditions to Britain in 55 BC & 54 BC and the influence of Rome was felt in southern Britain in the following decades. However, the conquest of Britain really began some 90 years later in AD 43. Politics played its part, but Britain's rich mineral wealth, including lead, zinc, copper, silver & gold was certainly attractive too. Most of what we now call England & Wales remained part of the empire until the Romans deserted Britain around AD 410.

During the first century the Romans established three permanent legionary fortresses – at modern day York, Caerleon (South Wales) and Chester. These remained key military bases throughout the period of Roman occupation.

Why did the Romans choose this far-flung corner of their empire to build a fortress?

Geography. The location of Deva meant that strategically it was important. It is perhaps difficult to imagine today, but Chester once looked out to sea and was an important port, remaining so for over a thousand years. The dry land where today's racecourse stands was once underwater, sitting in the middle of the (then much wider) River Dee and provided an excellent location for a harbour. Ships from across the Roman Empire supplied the fortress and often departed with local goods. A gentle flat-topped hill overlooking a sheltered estuary provided an excellent location for a military base.



- 1. Barracks
- 2. Principia
- 3. Senior office
- 4. Storecompound or hospital
- 5. Storecompound
- 6. Workshop
- 7. Elliptical building
- 8. Commander's house
- 9. Bathhouse
- 10. Alternative site for hospital
- 11. Granaries
- 12. Amphitheatre
- 13. Minerva Shrine
- 14. Roman Port

Why Deva?

The name Deva comes from the Latin for goddess. The fortress was often called Deva Victrix, with the second part of its name meaning victory. Deva lay in the territory of the Cornovii, the British tribe who occupied much of modern Cheshire & Shropshire. However, it lay very close to the territory of the Deceangli, who were settled in what we now know as north east Wales, while to the north, beyond the river Mersey, were the Brigantes.

What did Deva look like?

Deva was built in the classic Roman fortress style – Seen from above it resembled the shape of a giant playing card. This arrangement was seen right across the empire, from smaller forts to much larger legionary fortresses. Deva was established in the AD 70s, some 30 years after the Romans first landed on Britain's southern coast and by the end of the first century AD it was established as one of Britain's three legionary fortresses, providing the Romans with a substantial military presence in the region.

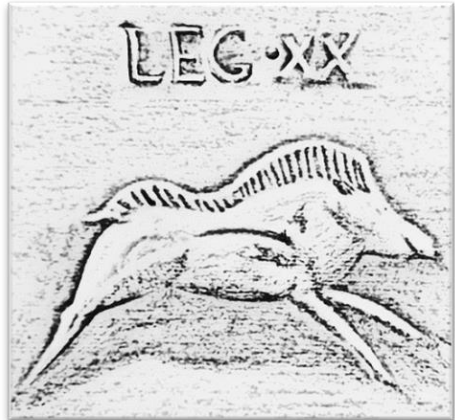
The Capital of Roman Britannia & Hibernia?

However, as we shall discover, there were a few interesting variations on the classic internal arrangements of a fortress. These, together with the fortresses size (some 20 percent larger the other two legionary fortresses) and Deva's location on the Irish sea have led historians and archaeologists to consider the view that Deva was intended as the capital of a combined province of Britain & Ireland. Take a look at a map of the British Isles and Chester is right there at the heart. As it was, the Emerald Isle was never added to the empire and Deva remained on the edge of the Roman world.

Who was here?

Although Deva was originally built by the II Legion, it is Rome's 20th Legion or 'Legia XX Valeria Victrix' that is most associated with Deva. Artifacts bearing 'LEG XX' and their emblem, the boar, have been discovered in Chester and the nearby small Roman sites at Holt & Prestatyn, both a little way across the modern Welsh border. The 20th Legion is thought to have been based at Deva from AD 88 until Rome pulled its troops from Britain in the early 5th century.

The legion served in many campaigns and fought in Gaul (modern France) as well as Britain during the time it was based at Deva. Evidence that the legion was involved in the construction of Hadrian's Wall, the northern frontier of the empire, has been discovered and its exploits have also featured in various works of historical fiction. Like other legions, it comprised around 5000 professional soldiers and was established long before it took up residence in Deva, drawing soldiers from across the empire. Chester has been home to a diverse population for a very long time! (If you were wondering, this guide has been brought to you by a Caledonian, Brigantian, Thraecian, Cantiacian and a couple of local Cornovii).



Civilian settlement

Of course, it wasn't just soldiers who were here. A civilian settlement grew up outside the fortress walls, with much of it situated on today's Foregate Street (beyond the east gate to the city), with local people supplying Deva with goods & services. From the end of the second century soldiers were allowed to

marry, with many no doubt taking wives from the local area and like other *canabae legionis* (civilian settlements that grew alongside a legionary fortress) around the empire, it would have become a place for veterans of the legion to settle.

What remains of the Roman Fortress?

Our walk will uncover some of the physical remains of Deva, but its legacy lives on in other ways too, perhaps a little less obvious, but no less important. For a start, there's the street plan. Modern Chester owes its layout to the Roman surveyors who laid out the 'Via Principalis', 'Via Praetoria', 'Via Decumana' and other smaller thoroughfares almost 2000 years ago. Then there are the city walls. Chester still boasts the most complete circuit of walls in the country and in the north and east these still follow the line of the Roman fortress walls. By contrast, the southern and western walls are mere youngsters, being only around 1000 years old.

The Rows, Chester's unique two-tiered shopping galleries that line the main streets, are thought to have developed around 700 years ago. Their origins have been the subject of much debate, but one popular school of thought is that they were built that way because of the substantial Roman remains that were still in existence during the medieval period.

Of course, there is the name Chester. The Saxons called the city *Legacaestir* which means City of the Legions. This has since become shortened to simply 'Chester'. In Welsh the city is usually these days known as Caer (meaning fortress), but often old maps called it Caer-Lleon, again derived from fortress of the Legions. The town of Caerleon in South Wales still bears this name, and it was also the site of one of Roman Britain's Legionary fortresses.

Our Walk

The walk is around 2 miles (3km) and takes you to some of the key sites of Deva.

From the Visitor Information Centre at the Town Hall, turn left and head up Northgate Street (or *Via Decumana*, as we are talking the Roman period).

To the rear of the Town Hall, where the 1960s market hall now stands, was a building whose use remains a puzzle. Known simply as the 'Elliptical building' due to its oval shape, it is unique in the whole Roman Empire and is one of the key differences between Deva and the other legionary fortresses in Britain. Its unusual shape coupled with its size adds weight to the theory that Chester was at one time intended to be the capital of an enlarged Britannia. Was it designed as the headquarters of the province's Governor?

Just to the north of the Town Hall are the relocated Roman column bases that now stand outside the Coach House inn.

Keep walking along Northgate Street and the arch of the Northgate (or *Porta Decumana*) itself will soon come into view. As its name implies, this was the northern gateway to the fortress and recent archaeological excavation has uncovered remains of the original Roman gateway. The present structure dates from 1810 and replaced the medieval gateway, which housed a gruesome gaol. Walk through the gateway via the pavement on the right-hand side of the street and when you are over the 18th century canal, turn to face the gate again. Deva's massive northern wall provides an impressive view. Built of local red sandstone, the lower blocks are the original Roman ones, with the upper blocks dating from more 'recent' centuries.

Pop back through the gate and climb the steps on the left that adjoin the gate, giving you access to the city wall. At the top of the steps, turn right and walk along the wall. A large, grassed area on the right will soon appear, with the Cathedral beyond.

This is now a pleasant green oasis called the Deanery Field, but once housed some of the legion's barrack blocks. Each block housed 80 men (a 'Century' in Roman military terms) and the Centurion who commanded them.

Continue along the wall, passing by King Charles Tower, which stands at the North East corner of the fortress and of course today's city wall. The wall turns right, and you are now walking along Deva's eastern wall. Continue along the wall, which offers up impressive views of the Cathedral. As you approach the famous Eastgate Clock, take the steps down to the Eastgate. Here the actual Roman gate consisted of two arches and survived until well into the 18th century, albeit hidden within a later medieval structure. The arches were uncovered during the medieval gate's replacement by the gate you see now.

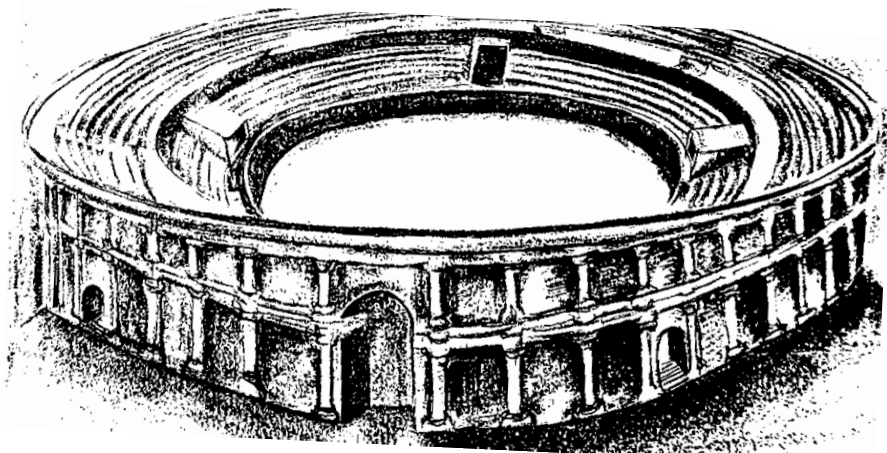
Walk through the Eastgate into Foregate Street and turn right into St John's Street. The short walk along this street will take you to the largest Roman Amphitheatre in Britain. There is a pedestrian crossing to take you over to the site and it is possible to explore it and on a fine day to sit on the surrounding grass and let your imagination take you back the best part of 2000 years to when this structure was built just outside the fortress.

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.

The amphitheatre 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 Grosvenor Museum.

Following excavations, the site was eventually opened to the public in 1972 and is 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 lively debate.



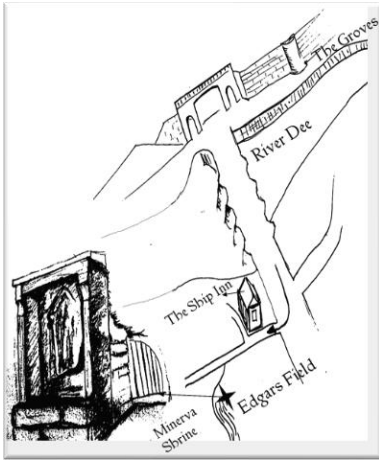
There are daily Roman soldier patrols of the city and of course they stop at the amphitheatre, so you may be lucky and see or hear one. Apart from the occasional Roman soldier patrol it is now a peaceful place but looking at the remains of the tethering ring on the floor of the amphitheatre reminds us that this site does not have a peaceful past. There are information boards around the site and worth having a read to fully appreciate its history.

Close to the amphitheatre is the Newgate, a 1930s gateway in the city walls. Adjoining is its smaller predecessor, the Wolfgate (also known as the Peppergate) together with the substantial base of the Roman corner tower marking the position of the south east corner of the fortress.



Souters lane lies next to the amphitheatre, a few metres from the Newgate. Between the lane and the city wall lie the Roman Gardens. Originally laid out in 1949, the gardens bring together Roman stonework that has been found across the city during various excavations and building work. Among its features, the gardens also contain a reconstruction of a Roman hypocaust or underground heating system. It's a very pleasant spot for a picnic on one of the many benches. Chester likes its visitors and locals alike to enjoy these attractions rather than leave them as museum pieces behind glass or barriers, so the Roman Gardens are used in the summer for the 'Moonlight Flicks', where you can watch a classic film under the stars – a magical experience for the whole family. This re-purposing is not a new concept for Chester. Over the centuries Roman masonry provided a ready supply of stone for rebuilding the city in later centuries.

Continue through the gardens and down to the River Dee and then turn right along the Groves, Chester's riverside promenade. Ahead you will see the stone arches of the Old Dee Bridge. The current bridge dates to the 14th century but stands at the same



spot where the Roman bridge once stood. Cross the bridge using the pavement on the left before crossing the road towards the Ship Inn as you reach the suburb of Handbridge which lies on the south bank of the river.

Take the path just beyond the Ship Inn, where you will enter Edgars Field, once the site of a Roman quarry. Ahead, by the sandstone outcrop, is the Minerva Shrine.

This shrine to the Roman Goddess of Wisdom still stands in its original place, making it totally unique in Western Europe. A tip for viewing – stand about two metres from the centre of the shrine and you will find it easier to make out Minerva, with her spear and accompanied by her owl.

This field would have been part of a busy quarry providing the local red sandstone that was used for the construction of Deva. The fortress was originally constructed in timber but soon rebuilt in stone. All the stone was quarried by hand then transported over the river.

Retrace your steps and cross back over the bridge. You are now following the route a Roman legionary would have taken when returning from the quarry or dealing with the local Britons across the river.



Go through the Bridgegate, this is now the southern entrance to
VIC Team

the walled city but lies outside the area of the Roman fortress. Amble up Lower Bridge Street once the main road from Chester into North Wales and pause as you reach the junction with the inner ring road (Pepper Street and Grosvenor Street). You are now stood opposite the Roman South Gate. Its eastern abutment once standing where St Michaels church is now. Carefully cross the road and walk and up the *Via Praetoria* (or Bridge Street as it is known these days). On your left you will see Pierpoint Lane, a short narrow street that is home to the Deva Roman Experience.

A little further up Bridge Street and on your right is No. 39, now Bridge Cafe & Bistro. There are not many places you can eat lunch in the company of an in situ Roman hypocaust. Visible in the cafe's cellar, this formed part of the large bath house or *thermae* complex that would have been used by the soldiers.

Ahead of you lies the Cross, the meeting point of Chester's main streets and where the *Via Praetoria* met the *Via Principalis* (today's Eastgate Street and Watergate Street). Here stood the *Principia*, the administrative headquarters of Deva, situated at the heart of the fortress.

At the Cross, turn right and then after St Peter's Church, turn left into Northgate Street. As you stroll up the street the basement of no 21-23, now home of Pret a Manger, contains impressive remains of the *Principia*'s columns. *Why not join one of the Roman Tours that leave the Visitor Information Centre to view this hidden piece of history?*

A little further ahead the street opens into the Town Hall Square, where your walk began. But before you finish, go through the small archway that joins the Dublin Packet pub to Blackstocks Fish & Chip shop, tucked away to your left in the corner of the square. Just through the arch is the Roman Strongroom or Treasury. Known as an *aerarium*, this was a secure area, situated underground in the heart of the *principia* and used for guarding the legion's wages and valuables. The strongroom

would have been very precious to the Roman army guarded day and night by soldiers but also by stone images of gods and goddesses warning off thieves.

Want to Find Out More?

The Strongroom completes your walk, but there is much more to discover.

The Grosvenor Museum (Grosvenor Street) is a great place to find out more about Roman Chester, with the museum's Roman archaeology collections showcased in two galleries. The first tells the story of Chester's legions and fortress, with displays on the army, buildings, and everyday life. The second houses the nationally important collection of Roman tombstones, discovered in the 19th century following their re-use in the city walls.



The Dewa Roman Experience (Pierpoint Lane, off Bridge Street). With its reconstructed barracks, taverna, granary, bathhouse and market stalls, Dewa gives you the opportunity to experience the sights, sounds and smells of Roman Britain. Artifacts from Dewa and across the Roman Empire are on display at Dewa. If you are wondering about the spelling 'Dewa', the Romans would have pronounced the v in Deva as a w.

For a guided tour, Roman Tours offer daily walks from the Visitor

Information Centre. The guides are in full authentic costume and will take you around Roman Chester, putting Deva into context. The tour also takes you into the basement of Pret a Manger to view the columns of the Principia.

If it's discovering Deva from your armchair, then you are also in luck.

When it comes to books, *Roman Chester: Fortress at the Edge of the World* by David Mason is THE book. Published in 2012 as an updated edition of 2001's *Roman Chester: City of the Eagles*, the author has been involved in the archaeology of Chester for over 50 years.

For the story of Chester in the centuries after the Romans departed, look at the follow up volume *Chester: AD400-1066*

For a detailed report on the archaeological dig that took place in the amphitheatre 2004-2006, take a look at: *Roman Amphitheatre of Chester Vol 1: The Prehistoric and Roman Archaeology* by Tony Wilmot & Dan Garner. Further details of this book, plus other archaeological reports covering Roman Chester can be found at www.cheshirearchaeology.org.uk

There are also a couple of TV programmes well worth checking out too:

The Channel 4 Series *Britain's Historic Towns* began with an episode devoted to Roman Chester, while the BBC produced *Timewatch* series featured an episode entitled *Britain's Lost Colosseum* and gives a behind the scenes look at the excavation of the amphitheatre in the mid-2000s.

And of course, there is a very impressive range of resources to explore online.

Price £1



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