

CHESTER ARCHAEOLOGICAL SOCIETY

TAG Deva Tour of Chester 17-19 December 2018

1 Introduction

Why does Chester exist? Why has it continued to exist?

As a crossroads between the Midlands, north Wales and the North, and as a window onto Irish Sea; phenomenon seen from Roman times to Civil War and also in railway network.

What is unusual about its surviving built heritage?

Built on a ridge in a bend of the river overlooking the estuary, so good views into and from the city (also picturesque). Very good survival of Roman street plan (because of lack of early medieval occupation within the walls until the establishment of the planned *burh*? Consequent (almost but not quite) straight lines enhance visible intelligibility. Stagnation of city centre from late medieval times to early 19th century led to survival of Rows and City Walls. Very self-conscious attempt to preserve character after foundation of CAS.

2 North Gate, Roman walls

On site of Roman *porta decumana*. Medieval gateway recorded in late 12th cent and consisted of narrow passage and postern flanked by two square towers. Last of medieval gates to be replaced; new gate by T Harrison 1810, who reported finding remains of Roman gate. Dismantling of steps to west in 2016 revealed 2 x N-S walls, interpreted as side walls of western tower of Roman gate.

To left walls run down to Bonewaldesthorpe's Tower, Spur Wall and Water Tower, latter built 1322. On the way is St Martin's Gate (1964), where St Linenhall St/St Martin's Way/Inner Ring Road breaks through City Walls (these streets previously curved round to meet King Street).

View NW across 'Old Port' to Dee estuary and north Wales. NB Port Pool in curve of river to north. Below is Chester Canal, built in 1779 to try to link Trent-Mersey canal to Dee and divert traffic from Liverpool. Connection at Middlewich not made until 1833, and canal only flourished when Wirral Line built to Ellesmere Port on Mersey in 1795 and Ellesmere Canal gave access to Denbighshire coalfield in 1805. Line of canal N of city centre was core of Chester's industrial growth, with cotton mill near Water Tower before 1789, another cotton mill to the east, flour mills as well as chemical works and lead works.

To right (E) is best surviving stretch of Roman curtain wall, standing to cornice level, 15' high. On top of cornice is half-round section with rebate in top to take parapet.

3 King Charles's Tower

Stands near site of Roman NE angle tower. Known as Phoenix Tower by early 17th cent, when rented to city guilds as meeting rooms. Had a gun on each floor during the Civil War siege. Abandoned 1773, but promoted as tourist attraction from 1840s because of legend that King Charles watched rout of his army at Rowton Moor in Sept 1645.



Kaleyard Gate attested 1274 to allow monks access to extramural gardens, still closed at 9 pm

4 **East Gate**

East Gate always the principal gate to the city. Final medieval form under Edward III with four octagonal towers (outer ones lower) and gothic arch, with remains of rounded Roman arch visible on city side. Lost outer towers during Civil War siege then totally rebuilt 1766/8, when more of the double-portal Roman gate became visible. Clock designed by John Douglas 1898/9.

5 **Roman Fortress Wall, South-East Angle Tower, Medieval Wall, Newgate**

Across road is SE angle tower. S wall ran along N side of Pepper St. Near S gate were fortress baths. Walls extended from SE and NW corner to river in late Saxon or early post-Conquest times. Small arch is Wolfgate (ON, attested in 12th cent), alderman's daughter abducted/eloped through it in 1573. Originally set in square tower. Rebuilt 1608 and again in 1768 (present structure). Present Newgate built 1938.

Just inside walls to N is Newgate Street (Fleshmongers' Lane), which lay in St John's parish and may have been site of eight canons' houses in the city recorded in Domesday Book. Did it have an early (pre-burh?) origin, joining St John's and church of SS Peter and Paul (St Werburgh) (if the latter existed)?

6 **Amphitheatre**

Amphitheatre discovered by chance 1929, part of E entrance and W *vomitorium* excavated 1930, later small digs established outer wall. Present extent of almost all of N half excavated 1960s; re-excavated in part 2004-6.

Built in the 70s of 1 cent at time of foundation of fortress – arena excavated; earth bank and stone wall c 15' high with assumed N & S entrance; modified c 100 after Leg XX moved in – external stairs, timber seating, external shrine, *nemeseum*, arena deepened. Did yellow sand used in arena come from Upton and Waverton, where there are small camps? Rebuilt prob in early 3 cent like rest of fortress – new outer wall, so greater capacity, N & S entrances rebuilt and E added; nine *vomitoria* incl 1 where W entrance should have been. Abandoned after 270s. *Vomitorium* W of N entrance blocked. Seven phases of sub-Roman occupation in arena. E entrance blocked and steps to ?tower or crypt of predecessor to St John's church inserted. Robbing of walls in 10th century?

Dee House – built for James Comberbatch, mayor and alderman (d 1737). Chapel added in 1867 for Ursuline convent school. St John's House – built over N entrance of amphitheatre a bit later; demolished for excavation of amphitheatre 1959. Both built on land formerly belonging to St John's Church.

7 **St John's Church**

Supposedly founded by Aethelred of Mercia in 689 but could have been founded under Aethelflaed in early 10th century as extra-urban church for merchants who moored below; cf Irish-Norse style cross fragments inside church and 40 Saxon



coins of Edward the Elder (899-924) found by church in 19th cent. Was amphitheatre used as market place? Cf above on remains at E entrance of amphitheatre. See of Bishop of Lichfield moved here 1075-1102 by Bishop Peter with a college of canons by 1086; canons and Dean had eight houses in Newgate Street just inside City Walls. Contained a relic called the 'Rood of Chester' esp venerated by Welsh; college of canons suppressed 1547 at Dissolution; 13-14th cent E end demolished 1581 when it was a parish church; town houses of wealthy grew up in precinct, but many demolished/destroyed during Civil War; rebuilt in 18th cent. W tower collapsed in 1881.

8 **Pepper Street**

Widened in early 1960s as part of Inner Ring Road, leading to loss of terrace of Georgian houses. Roman fortress baths under shopping precinct to north, which also cut Saxon Newgate Street. Classical façade on S side is that of Methodist New Connexion Chapel, built 1835. Closed just after WWI and subsequently incorporated into motor showrooms (used for manufacture of aircraft parts in WW2) and shops.

9 **Roman Gardens, Civil War Breach**

Roman Gardens established 1949/50 by Graham Webster, first 'professional' curator of Grosvenor Museum, to coincide with Festival of Britain; coincided with post-war tidying up of area outside new gate and SE Angle Tower; formerly site of clay tobacco pipe works; contains Roman architectural fragments formerly in Water Tower Gardens. Hypocaust *pilae* and large columns from fortress baths, salvaged 1863.

Chester Royalist during Civil War of 1642-6, and besieged by Parliamentarians 1643-6; ultimately population starved out. Bombardment from St John's churchyard made breach on 22 September 1645 but inhabitants fought off attack; probably repaired in 18th cent.

'Nine Houses' (actually only six, built 1610-20 as almshouses), saved from demolition by CAS campaigning in 1957.

10 **Weir, Dee Mills, Old Dee Bridge, Bridge Gate**

Weir built soon after Norman Conquest to provide head of water for Dee (corn) Mills, on city side of river; mills eventually burnt down 1895 and demolished 1910 for hydro station which survived in use until c 1950 and necessitated raising of weir.

Old Dee Bridge built 1387 on site of earlier bridges (poorly known); widened on upstream side by T Harrison 1825-6.

Medieval Bridgegate consisted of gothic arch with 2 round towers. A square water tower was added by John Tyrer in 1608; destroyed during Civil War siege and replaced by octagonal tower behind the gate; demolished 1781/2 when gate rebuilt by Joseph Turner (1729-1804), a Welsh architect who also built the current Watergate (1788), the terrace on Nicholas St (1780) and Point of Ayr lighthouse (1777). Plaque with Prince of Wales's feathers and date 171x by Bridge Gate salvaged from old gate.



11 Bear and Billet

'Bear and Billet' was new town house for Earl of Shrewsbury, built 1664 after Civil War siege (*cf* Cowper House in Bridge Street). NB late use of half timbering

12 St Olave's Church

Dedication of St Olave's, to the Norwegian King Olaf killed in 1030, may be as early as the mid-11th century. The present structure, entered from a small west terrace several feet above street level, is of uncertain date, although earlier than the mid-17th century. After its closure the church was kept in repair, and in 1858–9 it was thoroughly restored by James Harrison for use as a school.

Old King's Head, first built 1208 with stone street-level undercroft under timber-framed Row (now enclosed). It was the town house for Peter the Clerk, the administrator of Chester Castle; renovated several times, especially for Randle Holme I (one of four generations with this name, herald painters etc, mayor 1633-4; family were authors of useful maps and plans of the city incl St John's and the remains of the religious houses).

15-17 Castle Street earliest surviving brick buildings in Chester (late 17th cent), possibly originally had central doorway.

13 Castle, St Mary's Church

Castle built 1070 by Hugh Lupus as headquarters of earldom – wooden tower on motte (latter still visible from Grosvenor Street). Tower on motte rebuilt in 12th cent and Agricola Tower built as entrance. New gateway to Inner Bailey built 13th cent, Great Hall 1250-3. Outer ward rebuilt by T Harrison 1785-1811. Occupied by military until end of 20th century. Used as temporary mint for great recoinage of 1696/8, comptroller Edmond Halley. Earldom passed to Crown in 1237.

St Mary's (St Mary in Castro) granted to Abbey in 12th cent. Largely rebuilt in early 16th cent and restored by James Harrison in 1861/2, who also built the TSB 1851-3.

14 Grosvenor Museum

Grosvenor Museum founded in 1886 by CAS and Chester Soc Nat Sci, Lit and Art; extended 1895. (*Individual visit recommended*)

15 Nicholas Street/Whitefriars

SW angle tower of Roman fortress in car park of Magistrates Court, excavated 1964/5. Weaver Street and Whitefriars were inside Roman walls, Nicholas Street and Cuppin Street were outside – notice difference in heights – walls acting as lynchets. St Martin's church built on Nicholas Street between White Friars and Cuppin Street, ie just outside the Roman SW angle tower; existed by late 12th cent and demolished 1964. Commercial development never vigorous enough to expand into area between Nicholas Street/Linenhall Street and river, and area given over to nunneries and friaries in Middle Ages: Benedictine Nunnery on HQ site and Dominican friary to north of Black Friars lane as far as Lower Watergate Street; Franciscan (Grey) friary on N side of Lower Watergate Street (NB Grey Friars Lane is a misnomer resulting from 19th cent antiquarian speculation); Carmelite (White) friars on Whitefriars. After Dissolution, sites taken over by local elite and buildings in part reused, followed by



18th cent intensification (eg 'Pill Box Row' 1780) but site of Greyfriars not built up at all until 1778/9 for Georgian town houses. To the north, Infirmary built in 1761. Pioneering physician John Haygarth admitted smallpox patients in isolation in 1784.

Site of Benedictine nunnery bought by Brereton family of Handforth in E Cheshire. At time of Civil War it was the town house of Sir Wm Brereton, commander of Parliamentary forces in Cheshire and so pillaged by Welsh soldiers from Royalist garrison of city in 1643. Lay vacant until construction of militia barracks in 19th cent

16 **St Michael's & St Bridget's Churches, Rows**

St Michael's, St Bridget's stood opposite each other on site of Roman south gate; St Bridget's sandwiched between Cuppin Street and Whitefriars – all suggest that at that time Roman S wall and gate were still significant landmark features (note difference in height between the two streets). St Michael's established by mid-12th cent; chancel rood 1490s, N arcade 15th cent, much rebuilding 1582. Restored by James Harrison 1849-51. Referred to by Lucian as one of the 'guardians of Chester', like St Martin's.

St Bridget's existed by mid-12th cent but possibly much earlier Irish-Norse foundation. Rebuilt in Nicholas Street in 1829 when Grosvenor Street built, demolished 1892.

Rows a unique feature of Chester. Each building in fact a standard medieval townhouse, with cellar, shop over with two-storey hall behind, then jettied chamber (solar) over front of cellar. Difference is that at Chester cellars were only partly sunken – possibly because of high level of sandstone bedrock and also piles of Roman rubble behind. Good example of interior of Row building in Leche House on S side of Watergate Street. 'Stallboards' set out in front of cellars underneath solars (see 'Three Old Arches' for buildings without stallboards). Unresolved question as to how/when the Row walkways were linked up.

Rows originally existed in all four main streets within the bounds of the fortress – Eastgate Street, Watergate Street, Northgate Street as far as Town Hall Square, Bridge Street as far as Castle Street; went out of fashion c 1650-1750, and lost at west end of Watergate Street, east end of Eastgate Street, Lower Bridge Street, where fragments can still be seen. First row to be enclosed was in 'Falcon' in 1643 - built above 13th-cent cellar as town house of Grosvenor family.

Grosvenor Street built 1820s to new Grosvenor Bridge, opened 1832 and longest single span stone bridge in the world at the time. Diagonal alignment disrupted rectilinear layout of city inherited from Roman times.

17 **Cross**

Cross still the centre of Chester and default rendezvous. Set up by late 14th cent. Replaced by present cross in 1476. Pulled down 1646 but re-erected in Roman Gardens with new shaft in 1949 and put back in original position by Civic Trust in 1975. Originally had crucifix on top and figures in niches.

On site of main crossroads of Roman fortress, with main entrance to HQ (*principia*) under St Peter's church. St Peter's supposedly established by Aethelflaed c 907. Medieval church much enlarged in 1530s.



Pentice established as sheriff's court by 1288 on S side of Peter's church and also used briefly for city assembly until both moved to St Nicholas chapel after 1539; demolished 1803.

Holy Trinity on Watergate Street stood on site of Roman west gate; established by 1180s, repaired 1593 and restored again in 1637. Rebuilt in late 1860s by James Harrison.

18 **Music Hall Passage**

Music Hall Passage is SW exit from Abbey precinct to Northgate Street. Hidden church is chapel of St Nicholas, built 1348 and used for congregation of St Oswald., given up by them in 1539 and used as council chamber, music hall and shops. From 1881 parishioners used St Thomas on Parkgate Road. E side of St Werburgh St and St Werburgh's Mount rebuilt by John Douglas.

19 **Town Hall Square and Cathedral**

Square stands on E half of site of large Roman courtyard building (?store). Modern open form is Victorian; until 1862 contained Exchange (Council chamber/assembly room and shops) built 1695) and other market buildings. New Town Hall designed by W H Lynn of Belfast and built 1865-9, based on Cloth Hall at Ypres.

Cathedral founded as 10th cent Saxon minster (but possibly site of earlier church of SS Peter and Paul); refounded in 1092 as Benedictine Abbey; rebuilt in 13-14th and 15th-6th cents; granted whole NE quarter of city. Became cathedral only in 1541. Extensively restored in 1870s by George Gilbert Scott. Claustral buildings survive. Notable for quality of choir stalls (1380-90). Romanesque work in N transept. Barclays Bank now on site of Abbot's lodging. Cathedral contains restored shrine of St Werburgh behind high altar.

Minster and abbey dedicated to St Werburgh. Mercian princess, daughter of King Wulfhere, nun most of her life, died 699 and buried at Hanbury (Staffs); remains supposedly translated to Chester in 875 because of Danish invasion. Cult flourished in Chester in late Saxon and Norman times. Contained altar of St Oswald's parish, probably Aethelflaedan (relics transferred to Gloucester 909 – part of reassertion of Mercian kingdom). (*Individual visit recommended*). NB Cathedral at Height tour.

20 **Abbey Square**

Outer court of abbey; buildings mid-18th cent. Abbey Gateway built about 1300 by Richard the Engineer (c 1265-1365), employed by Edward I to help construct his castles at Chester, Flint, Rhuddlan and Conwy; died at Chester; possibly a member of the local Venables family. Reminiscent of Queen's Gate at Caernarfon Castle. Upper storey outer face rebuilt 1800. Leave via Little Abbey Gateway at NW corner of precinct; beyond is quarry, probably used for stone for Cathedral. Stone cottages built for lay clerks of the Cathedral in 1616.



21 People*John Douglas (1830 – 1911)*

Leading Chester architect of later 19th century. Built 500 buildings in Chester, NW England and N Wales, especially for Duke of Westminster. Born at Sandiway, buried in Overleigh cemetery. Had office at no 6 Abbey Square. Exponent of Gothic Revival and Elizabethan styles.

Grosvenor family

Lived at Eaton, 1 mile outside city from 15th cent; earl by 1784, marquess by 1851, duke from 1874. Got property in Westminster in 1677, source of wealth (also from lead-mining in Flintshire).

James Harrison (1814-66)

Leading Chester architect of 1840s-50s, important in Gothic Revival; son of local stonemason and one of founders of CAS. Restored many city churches (SS Michael, Mary, Peter, John, Holy Trinity) and Leche House and God's Providence House; also designed TSB (1851-3).

Thomas Harrison (1744-1829)

Born at Richmond in Yorkshire, died at St Martin's Lodge on Nicholas Street ('The Architect'), which he built 1822/3; buried at St Bridget's.

Restored Chester Castle 1775-1811

Commercial Newsrooms, Northgate St (1808)

Watergate House 1820

Widened Old Dee Bridge 1825

Grosvenor Bridge, opened posthumously in 1832

George Gilbert Scott (1811-78)

Also designed St Thomas of Canterbury Church and St Pancras Hotel as well as restoring Cathedral.

Joseph Turner (1729-1804)

Welsh architect who also built the current Watergate (1788), the Georgian terrace on Nicholas St (1780), 'Watergate Flags', and Point of Ayr lighthouse (1777); member of Chester Assembly.

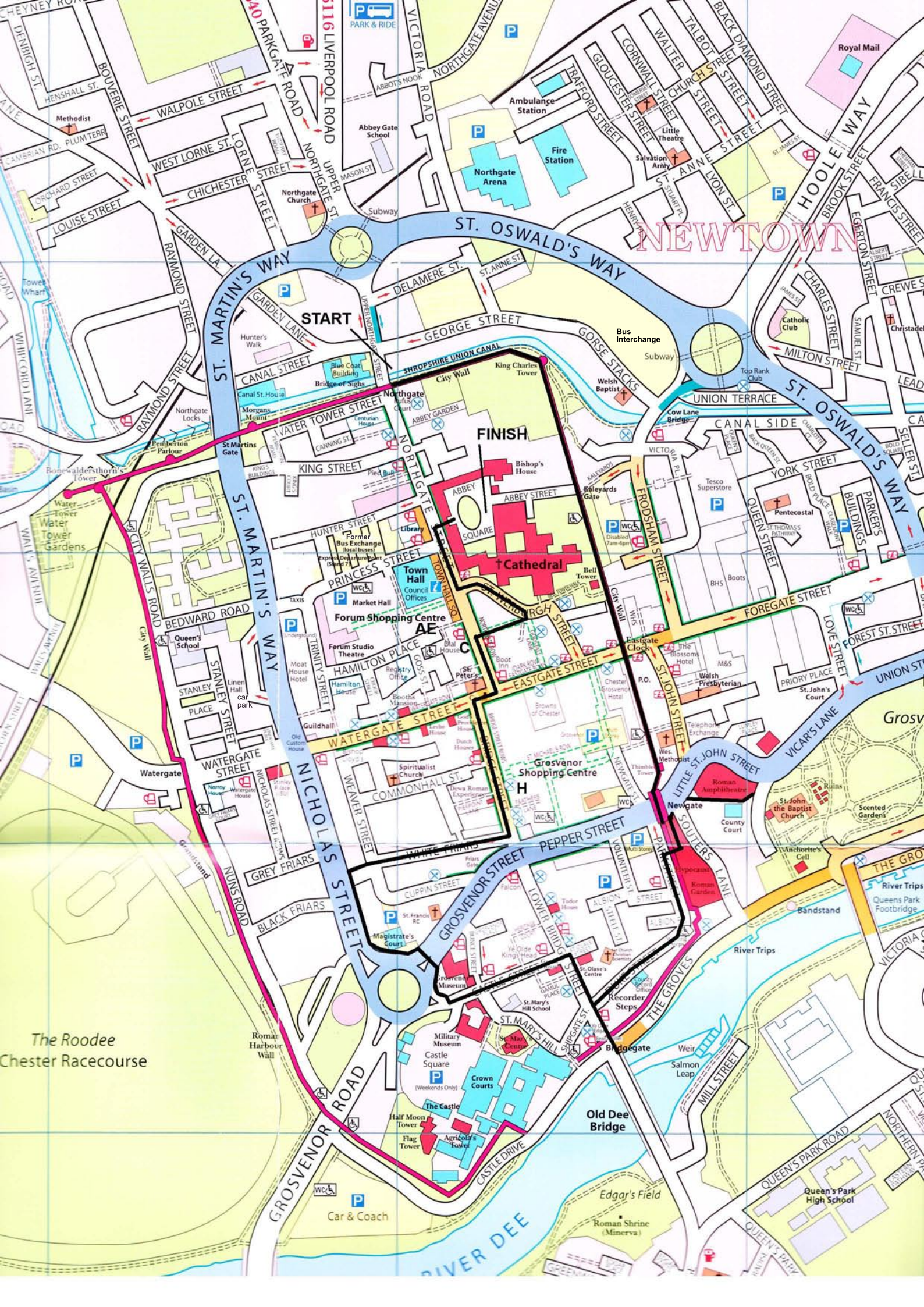
St Werburgh

Mercian princess, daughter of Wulfhere, nun most of her life, died 699 and buried at Hanbury (Staffs); remains supposedly translated to Chester in 875 because of Danish invasion. Cult flourished in Chester in late Saxon and Norman times.

Chester Mystery Plays

Performed by 1422 on Corpus Christi (Thursday after Trinity Sunday, any time between 21 May and 24 June); based on biblical texts from Creation to Last Judgement and performed by city guildsmen and craftsmen on carts around town; each guild performed one play (25 in all). Banned by Elizabeth I as popery, but still performed in 1568 and 1675, when Mayor was summoned to London to justify himself. Revived for Festival of Britain in 1951 and now performed every 5 years (last June 2018).





NEWTOWN

START

FINISH

Cathedral

Forum Shopping Centre

Grosvenor Shopping Centre

The Roodee
Chester Racecourse

Roman Harbour Wall

Castle Square

Old Dee Bridge

Queen's Park High School