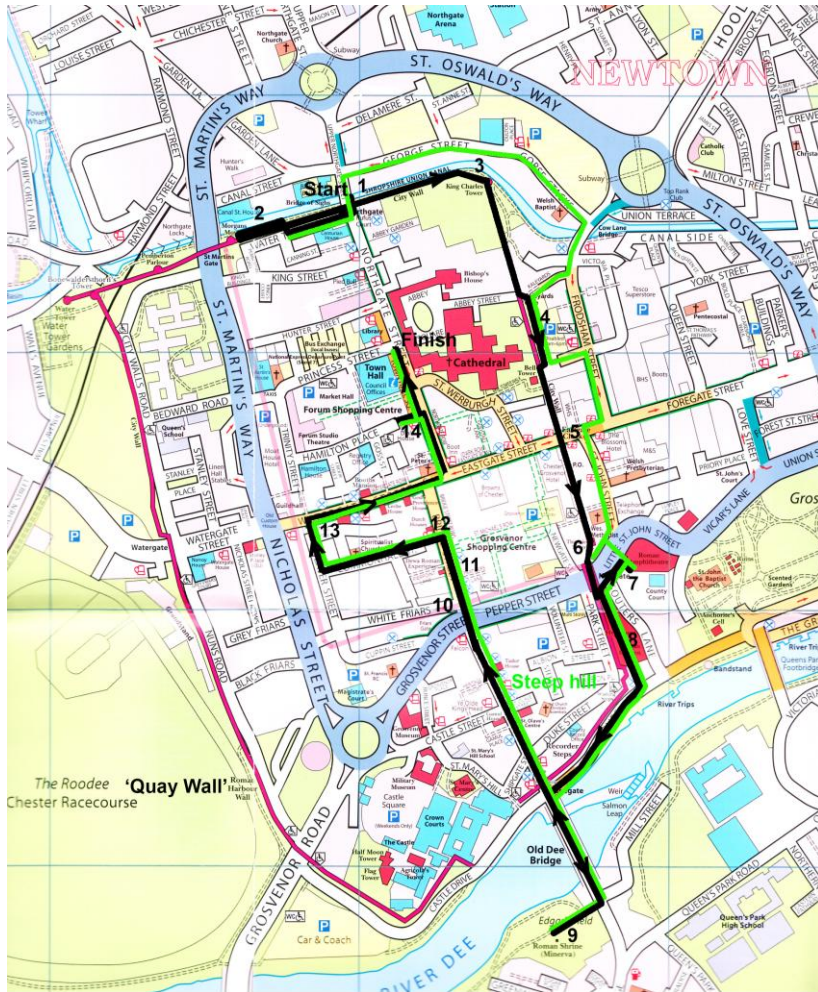


Roman Chester: Looking Beneath the Surface

Monday 2 June 2025, 2:00pm

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Chester Archaeological Society





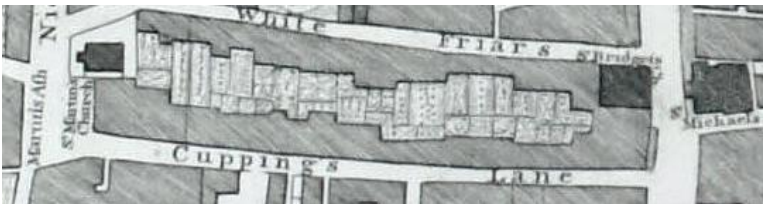
Above: Tour route (black). The vanished western and southern Roman defences are shown in pink just inside the inner ring road (blue).
 Wheelchair-accessible route (green), which may be followed independently. Note the steep gradient up Lower Bridge Street!
 Left: Plan of the Roman fortress (after D Mason) *

Introduction

The known Roman fortress at Chester was constructed in the mid-70s AD and probably abandoned by 390 (there are hints of earlier military occupation), about 20 years before the traditional date for the abandonment of the British province. The initial garrison was Legion II *Adiutrix*, succeeded in the late 80s by Legion XX *Valeria Victrix*. Detachments of the garrison were absent for much of the 2nd century, especially on the northern frontier, causing interruptions in building work at Chester. There was a major rebuilding campaign in the early 3rd century. Detachments of the legion are again attested on the continent in the middle of the century. The legion is not recorded after the end of the 3rd century and may have been disbanded for its support of the British usurpers Carausius and Allectus. Nevertheless, the fortress continued to be occupied and buildings to be reconstructed in the 4th century.

It is to the legionary fortress that the visible Roman remains at Chester overwhelmingly relate, especially to its defences. The north and east defences survive embedded within the present City Walls, from St Martin's Way at the north-west corner to Pepper Street at the south-east; to the south and west of these points the City Walls are a 12th-century creation, although the north-west and south-east arms to the river were conceivably first built before the Norman Conquest, and there may have been a Roman wall (the so-called 'Quay Wall') enclosing the western extramural settlement.

The southern and western Roman defences were probably demolished piecemeal during the Middle Ages. They can still be traced in the townscape by the narrowly spaced pairs of streets that flank their lines: Whitefriars/Cuppin Street; Weaver Street/Nicholas Street; Trinity Street/St Martin's Way. The missing gateways are marked by churches: St Michael's (and formerly St Bridget's) at the south gate, and Holy Trinity at the west gate. The now-demolished St Martin's Church stood just outside the south-west angle tower.



Above: Extract from the Hunter map of Chester, 1789, showing Whitefriars and Cuppin Street, with St Michael's and St Bridget's churches to the east and St Martin's to the west **

Right: St Martin's Church before demolition in 1964 **



Watergate Street and Eastgate Street perpetuate the line of the *via principalis*, Bridge Street that of the *via praetoria*, with St Peter's Church at the Cross overlying part of the *principia*.

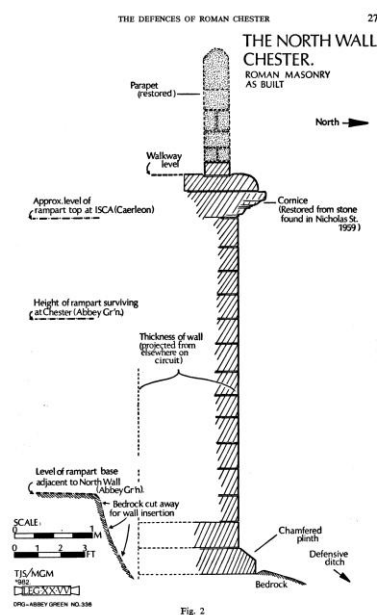
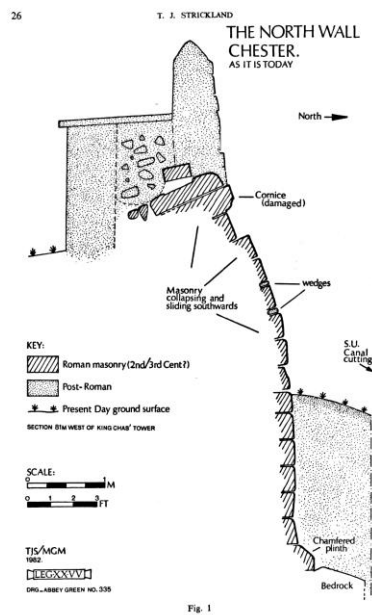
The highest-quality buildings outside the fortress seem to have lain to its west, south of Lower Watergate Street, but no complete plans have been recovered. To the north of the street lay a large bath house and the Infirmary Field inhumation cemetery. There was settlement to the south of the fortress (including the probable *mansio* (official guest house)) and to the east as far as St Oswald's Way (mainly strip buildings), in both cases apparently beyond a clear zone c 150 m wide devoid of buildings apart from the amphitheatre and the parade ground to the north of it, over what is now Frodsham Street. The land to the north and north-east of the fortress seems to have been given over to quarry- and clay pits.

In addition to those at Infirmary Field, burials (both cremation and inhumation) have been found along the approach roads north and east of the fortress and along Eaton Road (Watling Street) on the south side of the Dee, as well as along the river bank.

1 Canal Bridge outside Northgate (Start)

The initial defences comprised a turf rampart with timber gates and towers. The gates and towers were rebuilt in stone, and the outside of the rampart was supplemented by a stone revetment; this work is generally considered to date to the end of the first century, although there is some evidence for 3rd-century work on the east side of the fortress.

Just east of the Northgate, the full height of the wall survives to the cornice and parapet foundation block. The curvature is presumably the result of gradual settlement of the rampart over the centuries, and the pressure of the later wall above.



Some time after the middle of the 3rd century, or even in the Early Middle Ages, parts at least of the revetment collapsed into the ditch, possibly as a result of recutting the ditch too close to the foot of the wall. It was rebuilt using smaller blocks and architectural fragments, including tombstones; in some places there seems to have been a further collapse. Parts of the revetment were rebuilt to a 3m gauge rather than the original 1.5m. However, all these events remain poorly understood and dated.

2 Northgate Gardens

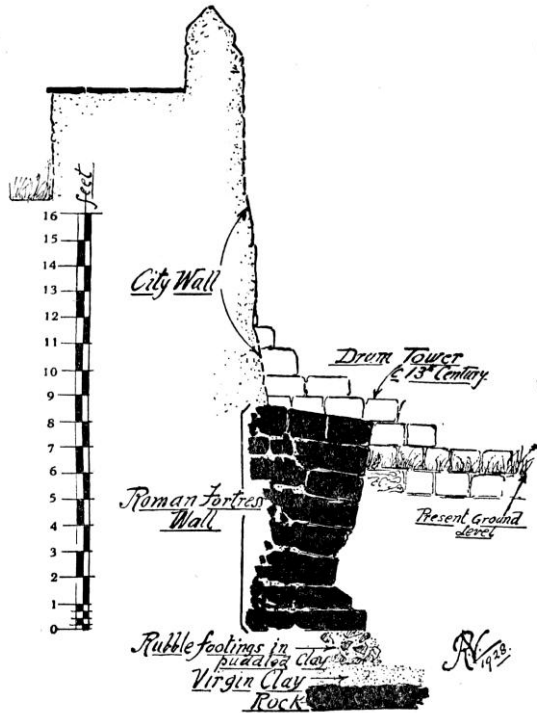
In the Middle Ages, a conventional wall with two faces was constructed on top of the surviving Roman defences, often with an earth bank behind; it was extensively rebuilt in the later 17th and 18th centuries. To varying degrees it was set back from the Roman revetment, with its rear face set in the rampart and pushing the surviving courses of the revetment outwards. In the 19th century, the North Wall west of the Northgate showed itself liable to collapse (perhaps because of the lack of an earth bank behind and the removal of cottages that had previously been built up against it) and was dismantled and rebuilt. This section was examined in 1892 but had to be rebuilt again in 1989/90.

3 King Charles's Tower

The buttresses projecting from the outer face of the City Wall just west of King Charles Tower may be built on the side walls of the Roman angle tower. Note the curvature below the tower, which may reflect the corner of the fortress

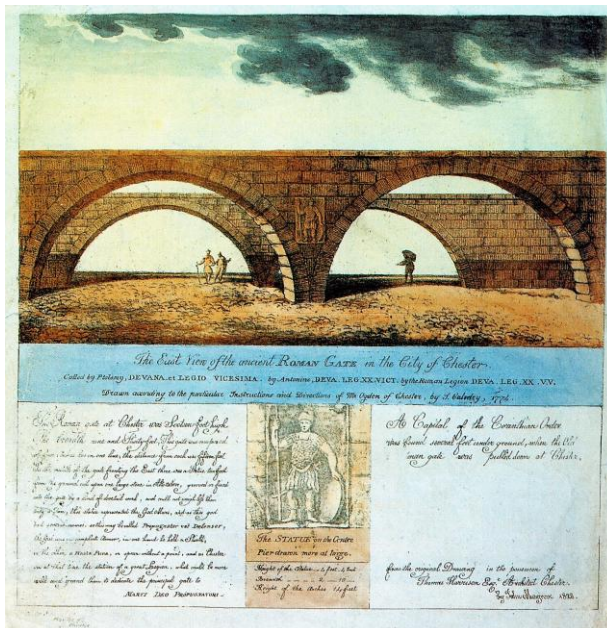
4 Kaleyards

Here is a long stretch of post-medieval wall (and medieval tower) set at the back of the Roman revetment.



5 Eastgate

There is little archaeological information about Chester's Roman gateways. However, the medieval Eastgate incorporated part of the Roman gate, and the portals of the latter were revealed when the medieval gate was dismantled in 1766. The Roman road level here may have been as much as 2m below the present level.



6 South-East Angle Tower

This was discovered in 1908 and completely excavated in 1930. Its discovery was important in establishing the limits of the fortress.



7 Amphitheatre

This was recognised during building work in 1929 and initial excavations took place in advance of an abortive road scheme in 1930–3. The northern half of the arena and the northern and eastern entrances were cleared in 1960–9. The interpretation of the structure and its dating were revised after re-excitation between 2000 and 2006. Our present understanding is as follows:

- Initial construction in the mid-70s: excavation of the arena with north and south entrances only; seating bank of earth against outer wall.
- Modification by AD 100, with the addition of steps to the outer wall, the replacement of the earth seating bank by a timber framework, ?deepening of the arena and construction of the *Nemeseum* by the north entrance.
- Reconstruction in the early 3rd century, involving a new outer wall, entrances on all axes, with a total of eight intermediate *vomitoria*; solid lower seating bank and timber framework above.
- Abandonment in the late 3rd century.

8 Roman Gardens

These were laid out by Graham Webster, Curator of the Grosvenor Museum, and the City Engineer, Charles Greenwood, as Chester's contribution to the 1951 Festival of Britain, along with the remains of the south-east angle-tower opposite. Most of the architectural fragments come from the fortress bath house on Bridge Street, and there is a modern reproduction of part of a mosaic found in the *frigidarium* of the baths in 1909.

9 Shrine of Minerva

Although very weathered, Minerva is shown in classical fashion on the face of a quarry used mainly in the second century. Although carvings on rock faces were not unusual in the Roman empire, we are aware of only two other carvings of deities in Britain, both of the native god Cocidius and both from Northumberland: 'Robin of Risingham' and one from North Yardhope in Upper Coquetdale. It is unlikely that the niche alongside was originally its present size. The figure may have been venerated as the Virgin Mary in the Middle Ages and the niche used for offerings; there is a tradition of there having been a chapel in the field.

It may be relevant that a late second- or third-century altar found in Bridge Street Row (East) and now in the Grosvenor Museum was dedicated to Minerva by Furius Fortunatus, 'senior master', probably of a guild (*RIB* 1, 457; Henig 2004, no 12). A lead statuette of Minerva has also been found nearby on the bank of the Dee (*CHER* 8600/11).

The Roman Goddess Minerva

Goddess of Wisdom, Justice, Strategy, Crafts and Trade

On the face of the rock outcrop is a worn carving of the Roman goddess Minerva, standing within a stylised temple. She holds a spear in her right hand and possibly a shield in her left. An owl is perched on her left shoulder and an altar is shown to her right. There may already have been a niche that could be used for offerings, but it was probably enlarged later.

Sandstone rubble found across Edgar's Field shows that it was the site of a Roman quarry, active mainly in the 2nd century AD. The landscape may have looked different at that time, as quarrying took place in Handbridge until the 19th century.

Minerva was one of the most important deities of the Roman state, but it was as the patroness of crafts that she was depicted here. Images of deities carved into the solid rock are very rare in Roman Britain.

At Chester, the choice of Minerva and the classical style of the carving reflect the status and culture of the legionary fortress.

The figure may have survived the Middle Ages because it was thought to be an image of the Virgin Mary. By the 18th century the niche was known as Edgar's Cave after the Saxon King Edgar, who was rowed on the River Dee in AD 973. Edgar also gave his name to the field and was said to have had a palace there.

To the goddess Minerva
Furius Fortunatus, Senior
Master, fulfilled his vow.

Dedication on Roman altar found in Bridge Street Row East, 1861



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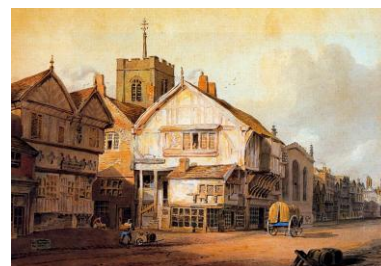
Current Minerva Shrine interpretation panel *

10 Junction of Bridge Street and Whitefriars

This site marks the south gate of the Roman fortress. It has been suggested that St Michael's Church to the east and St Bridget's to the west (demolished in 1828 to make way for Grosvenor Street) originally occupied the gate towers. An area of concrete found west of St Michael's has been thought to represent the floor of the eastern tower.

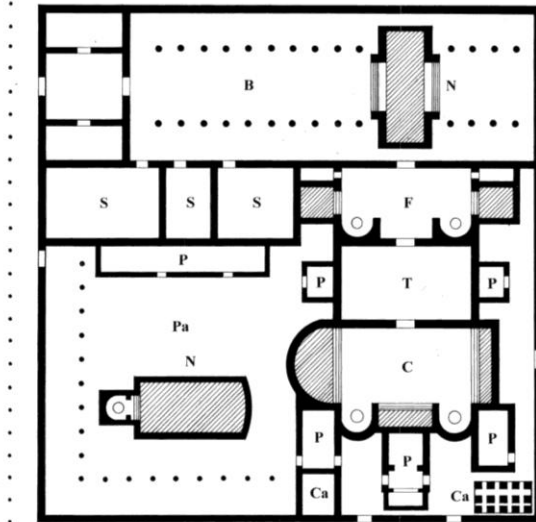
The narrowly spaced lanes Whitefriars and Cuppin Street respectively mark the inside and outside of the vanished southern defences.

Right: Watercolour of St Bridget's, 1803, looking towards the Cross *

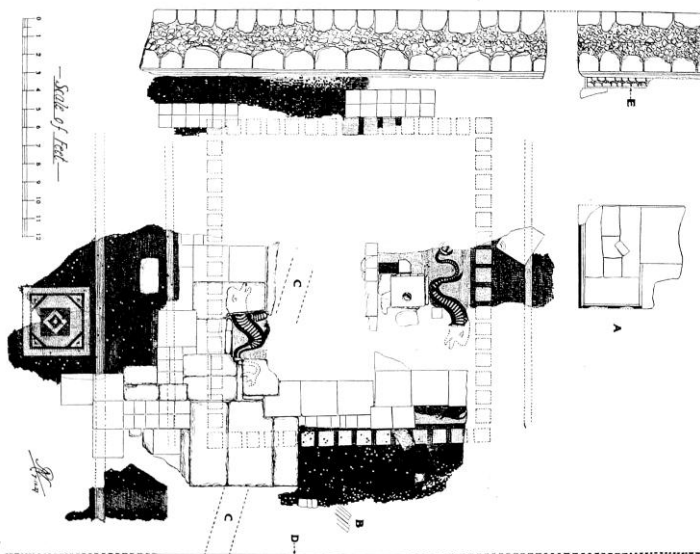


11 'Bridge Café and Bistro'

The hypocaust of a *sudatorium* attached to the south side of the exercise hall of the baths can be seen in the cellar of this café. The use of sandstone rather than brick for the *pilae* suggests that they belong to a 4th-century refurbishment. The suspended floor of the hypocaust is at approximately modern street level. Part of a mosaic in the *frigidarium* of the baths was found during excavations in 1909.



Chester fortress baths: early Flavian



Top left: Plan of the fortress baths * (after D Mason) *

Top right: Clearance of the exercise hall of the baths, 1863

Left: Mosaic found in the *frigidarium*, 1909

12 View towards the Cross and St Peter's Church

St Peter's Church occupies the south-eastern part of the site of the Headquarters building) *principia*, although the bottom of Northgate Street carved through the eastern side of the Roman building. The south side of the *principia* was probably raised on a podium, as is St Peter's today.

13 Holy Trinity Church

This was one of the churches that marked the now-vanished gates of the fortress, in this case the western gate.

14 Strongroom (Finish)

This was found during excavations in 1967–9 and marks the northern extent of the *principia*. Fallen columns from the *basilica principiorum* were found when enlarging a cellar at 23 Northgate Street (currently Prêt à Manger) in 1897.



View of Excavations looking East.

To the north lies Town Hall Square, which occupies the eastern half of the large Roman courtyard building (stores?) that lay behind the *principia*. Beyond that, Northgate Street has been displaced from the line of the *via decumana* to join what would have been the north-east corner of the building.

Acknowledgements

Illustrations marked * reproduced by courtesy of West Cheshire Museums Cheshire West and Chester Council; ** Cheshire Archives and Local Studies; all other illustrations Chester Archaeological Society.