

Introduction

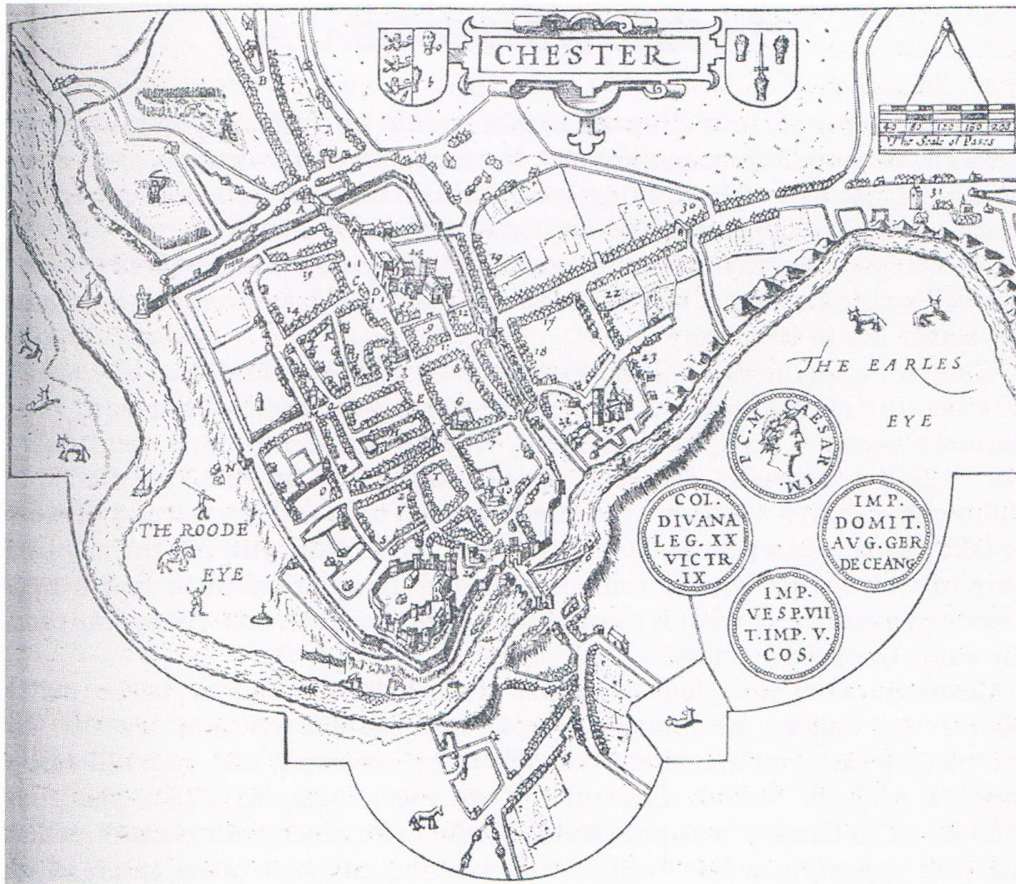
'I was quite enchanted at Chester, so that I could with difficulty quit it' James Boswell wrote to Dr Johnson in 1779, but it could just as easily have been me, as a child, excited after my first visit. On the way home, I told my Mum that I wanted to live in the old city one day and, as it turned out, thirteen years later (and twenty-five years ago), I did. Chester changed a lot between Boswell's visit and mine, but its magnetic attraction is as strong as ever, and the secret lies in its history.

Chester began life as a military fortress, then grew into a fortified city which was also the most important port on the north-west coast of England. Had natural forces not conspired against it, Chester would now be a metropolis, but over the centuries the River Dee slowly silted up and, by the mid-eighteenth century, Chester's prosperity was left high and dry. Liverpool grew to take its place as a port and Chester looked on in envy. Ah, but the city had only to wait for the age of romanticism and antiquarianism to find a new source of income, for what is more picturesque, poignant and interesting than the ruins of past greatness?

Cestrians were not slow to realize that there was money to be made out of the visitors, as Johnson's reply to Boswell's effusion reveals: 'In the place where you are, there is much to be observed, and you will easily procure yourself skilful directors'. Two years later, in 1781, the first guidebook to Chester was published. By the early nineteenth century, when the first day-trippers had begun to arrive, the city had taken stock of its assets. The medieval castle had gone, admittedly, and the cathedral was plain and desperately in need of repair, but the city walls were unbroken and commanded fine views of the Welsh hills. There were pleasant walks to be enjoyed along the banks of the river. Most of Chester's unique rows were still standing and there were a number of old, quirky timber buildings, which could be restored. Perhaps some new ones might be built in a similar style, to blend in with them and make the streets more picturesque than ever?

An American journalist named C M Kirkland wrote the following impression of Chester for the *Boston Mirror* in 1848:

The aspect presented on entering is simply that of an old, ill-built, narrow-streeted town, with houses leaning over the pathway; windows of every conceivable irregularity of size, shape and position; people looking quaint enough to be in keeping with these surroundings; and a general air of 'the world forgetting by the world forgot' about it, curious enough to one fresh from the bustle of New York ... As you walk the streets, you see how romance was born in England ... We do not expect to find any



John Speed's map of Chester (1610)

portion of England more characteristic and interesting than Chester. It breathes of feudal times, and is enveloped in associations of romance and poetry ...

Another American, the writer Henry James, writing over half a century later, found the same scenes morbidly grotesque:

... gables cruelly quaint, dreadfully expressive. Fix one of them with your gaze, and it seems fairly to reek with mortality. Every stain and crevice seems to syllable some human record – a record of lives airless and unlighted ... I am quite unable to think of them save as peopled by the victims of dismal old-world pains and fears. Human life, surely, packed away behind those impenetrable lattices of lead and bottle-glass, just above the black outer beam marks the suffocating nearness of the ceiling, can have expanded into scant freedom and bloomed into small sweetness.

Chester contains over two hundred listed historic buildings, but the oldest and most interesting of them often go unnoticed by the visitors, overshadowed as they often are by grandiose Victorian imitations. Chester may have been founded by the Romans, but it was the Victorians who invented the city that we know today, by creating the unmistakable Chester 'look'. How many visitors, I wonder, notice the dates on the venerable-looking buildings at the Cross; how many recognize the figure of Queen Victoria in the medieval-looking carvings on St Werburgh St, or, amongst the gargoyles on the cathedral, pick out the faces of Gladstone and Disraeli?

Chester's transition from port to tourist hotspot is now complete; the trade in Irish linen and Cheshire cheese has made way for the import and export of visitors – six to eight million of them each year. About 20,000 people now work in its money-spinning tourism and leisure industry. As a community, the city has had to suffer for this prosperity: out of a population of about 66,000, only 1,000 now live within the city walls; compare that with the 5,000–6,000 legionaries that, two thousand years ago, were packed into an area half the size!

There are other problems, of course. How does a city whose street plan was laid down two thousand years before the invention of the motor car solve its traffic problems? How can it thrive as a commercial city without damaging its own treasures? How do you make an omelette without breaking eggs? In the 1960s, the time came to make the omelette and there were some who did not seem to mind how many eggs they broke, prompting Donald Insall, in his *Historic Town* study of Chester (1968) to write: 'Should we remove the Cathedral to ease traffic movement? ... The modern road to hell is paved with tarmac and lined by buildings.'

The editor of the *Chester Chronicle* showed the same concerns:

Our task, in ordering the changes that are inevitable, is to preserve something of the old city's character. To do this, are we to shut out the ideas of our own time and go on repeating Tudor? The answer must be firmly No. But I am pondering what kind of pattern there will be in Northgate Street with a modern Market, a Victorian Gothic Town Hall, the mellowed sandstone of the Cathedral, the black-and-white reproductions here and there, and the contemporary investment-lot style ... Chester is not Coventry. We are not starting afresh here with a free hand at an entirely contemporary and experimental design for modern living ...

Many would argue that 'repeating Tudor' (if, by that, he meant continuing to develop Chester's tradition of pastiche architecture) is exactly what *was* wanted, particularly if they have seen the flats at Salmon Leap, the motor garage on Lower Bridge St, and McDonalds by the Town Hall.

Chester, for all its carbuncles, is still the most picturesque city in England, but it does not please everybody. Some find it provincial and dull; others complain that the city does nothing but cash in on its assets at the expense of cultural development; and some find this 'Toy Town' with its nailed-on wooden facades essentially phoney. And Cestrians themselves have had plenty of criticism over the years. Dean Swift is said to have scratched these verses on a window when he stayed at the Yacht Inn:

The Walls of this town
Are full of reknown
And strangers delight to walk round 'em;
But as for the dwellers,
Both buyers and sellers,
For me, you may hang 'em or drown 'em.

A few years ago, there was a running debate on the letters page of the *Chester Chronicle* as to whether Cestrians are 'the rudest people in Britain'. Opinions were equally divided between those who find them cold and unfriendly and those (like me) who have always found them warm and welcoming.

This Companion, at any rate, extends a warm welcome to visitor and native alike, for it covers aspects of Chester's history which will be of interest to both. So, as the town crier would say, 'Welcome to the Historic City of Chester!' Come and experience its unique rows, its cathedral, its ancient walls, its Roman amphitheatre and its rude people! If you are a resident, you probably know less than you think, for there is always something more to learn about this city. If you are a newcomer, remember Dr Johnson's advice to Boswell; there is, indeed, much to be observed in this city and you have in your hands, I like to think, a skilful director, but you must *take your time*. One discovery will lead to another and your fascination will grow, until you echo the words of Nathaniel Hawthorne: 'I must go again and again to Chester, for I suppose there is no more curious place in the world.'