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Right under our noses

It's easy to overlook Chester, but this charming English city is so full of history that a visit can bring you all the way back to Roman times, writes **Eleanor Fitzsimons**

PERHAPS FAMILIAR to many of us only as a railway station on the line from Holyhead to London, or as a town close to the vast Cheshire Oaks designer outlet, Chester is a charming city that deserves a visit in its own right.

In fact, as shown by the words "Charming Miss Oldfield 1736", which Samuel Johnson reputedly scratched into the first-floor window of Olde Leche House – now Sofa Workshop – on Watergate Street, discerning out-of-towners have long been attracted here, and this pocket-sized English city, which has a modest population of 120,000, attracts six million visitors a year.

Chester is best explored on foot. The main thoroughfares are easily negotiated and pleasantly traffic free for much of the day, and you could miss many of the city's architectural oddities from the top deck of a tour bus.

The earliest visitors, the occupants who shaped this city in a way that has lasted millennia, were the Romans, who arrived in about AD 75 and remained for three centuries. Attracted by the defensive and shipping potential of the River Dee, the Romans founded a significant garrison port here, naming it Deva. Chester's streets trace the outline of what was the most important Roman fortress in Britannia; Eastgate Street, the main thoroughfare, follows the route of the Roman Via Principalis.

Once these early occupants had retreated to deal with trou-

bling matters closer to home, their Saxon successors arrived and gave the city its modern name. (They would, in fact, have called any collection of Roman buildings a *ceaster*, but over time this was corrupted to Chester.)

The Normans bestowed a notable abbey and imposing castle upon the city, enclosing it within three kilometres of walls so thick that they survive almost entirely intact to this day.

Chester thrived during the Middle Ages, almost came a cropper when it backed the royalist horse during the English Civil War and was rebuilt by the Victorians – but more of that anon.

The central streets are characterised by the distinctive medieval galleried walkways that connect rows of two-tiered black-and-white half-timbered houses. They were named after the trades that thrived in them: Ironmongers' Row, Shoemakers' Row, Cookes' Row and so forth.

Chester suffered greatly during the civil war. In 1645 Oliver Cromwell's Parliamentarians tried to force their way into the city, which had defiantly remained loyal to Charles I. Chester was besieged, and cannonballs rained down for almost two years, resulting in squalor that prevailed for much of the 17th century.

The passage of two further centuries allowed classical, Georgian and Gothic styles to emerge before the Victorians reinvented Chester as a sort of medieval theme park.

Chester's most distinctive landmark, the Eastgate arch, is adorned with an ironwork clock commissioned to celebrate Queen Victoria's diamond jubilee, in 1897, the date intricately wrought upon it. Production overran by two years, however, and the second most-photographed clock in Britain, after Big Ben, was belatedly erected only in 1899.

Recommended walks outside the centre take visitors atop the city walls, down to the banks of the Dee and along the quiet tow-

path bordering the Shropshire Union Canal. The original Roman walls were made of wood, with deep ditches that later accommodated the foundations for the medieval walls. The well-maintained stone walls support a breathtaking walkway. Signs highlight landmarks such as watchtowers and the wishing steps that link the east and south walls. You can also see the city's imposing cathedral from them.

In 1092 Hugh Lupus, the first Norman earl of Chester, and nephew of William the Conqueror, founded a Benedictine abbey here. Work on the south side of the building began in 1360 but was halted by the plague – a third of the population lost their lives – and didn't resume for 130 years. The abbey was dissolved by King Henry VIII, but the fine sandstone building was left intact and reclassified as a cathedral. A story persists that Handel composed some of his *Messiah* in Chester Cathedral while waiting for the steamer that would take him to Dublin.

The city's Roman amphitheatre, which is being excavated and restored, was stumbled upon as recently as 1929 – extraordinary, considering that it is thought to be the largest in Britain, once capable of holding 7,000 spectators.

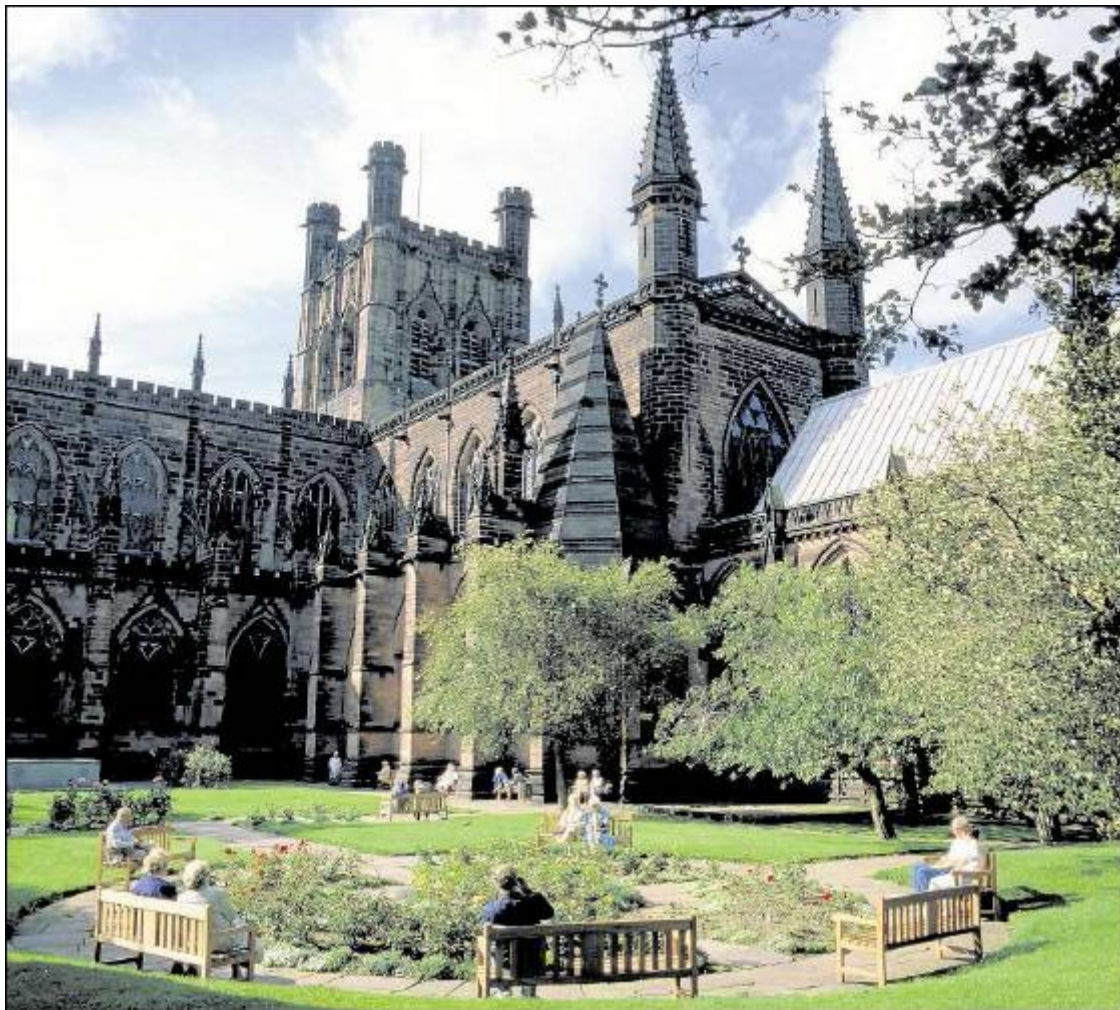
For a different take on the city's past, you can take part in a historic pub crawl, visiting the wonderfully atmospheric Boot Inn, which dates from 1643 and is reputed to have operated as a brothel a century ago, and the recently renovated Falcon, located in an oak-beamed 13th-century building on Bridge Street. Thence to the Pied Bull, a coaching inn on Northgate Street, and perhaps the Old Harkers Arms, a Victorian-themed pub on Russell Street. The best place to park your bar stool is the Albion Inn. This authentic first World War pub is a living museum, well worth popping into for a refreshing pint of real ale.

Benefiting from its proximity to the ferry port at Holyhead, a mere 90-minute drive away, and Liverpool's John Lennon Airport, 25km away, Chester is within easy reach of Irish holidaymakers who sometimes neglect the treasures nestling just beneath our noses.

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Go there

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Getting a Handel on *Messiah*: Chester Cathedral. Photograph: Britain on View



CHESHIRE CHARM The city has medieval galleried walkways. Photograph: Britain on View

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