

Chester's Cross

Close your eyes and listen to what surrounds you. The sound of transit, of visitors coming from very different places would not be much different to the sounds of Chester's busy town centre in the Middle Ages.

Let the toll of the bells of St Peter's, here for more than a thousand years, take you back to when Chester was a place of kings. Change the sound of the car engines for the clumping of hooves from different carts approaching on a busy market day; feel the smell of fish and freshly baked bread, and all the different products that are for sale at each stand and let your mind revel in the noisy town centre.

Did you know?

In Roman times, Chester was not a town, but a fortress. Instead of houses, there were barracks, and civilians and families lived outside.

The Roman fortress was smaller than the actual walls. These were extended in the tenth century. The main crossroad was not the centre in the Roman era.

The centre came alive on market days, twice a week, which drew people from across the frontier with Wales.

King Edward I stayed in Chester for a time during his campaigns on Wales. Chester became a crucial supply base and the market was filled with wares to supply the armies and the inhabitants.

Before the war and after the war, it was not strange to hear Cymraeg (Welsh) in these streets. But listen carefully, you may still hear it today!

The High Cross that you can see now is a reconstruction of the one raised in the fourteenth century, but the area was understood as being a cross or a crossroad before that.

As it is easy to see, the town's Cross is not an actual cross, though the stone market cross here standing commemorates this symbolic spot. Eastgate Street, Bridge Street and Watergate Street merge here in one spot, but walking from the North gate would draw you not here, but a bit down Eastgate Street. This was also the main crossroad of the Roman fortress of Deva Victrix. In the spot you are standing, before the Romans left, the streets were quieter, and where St Peter's stands, the Roman army's headquarters split the northern street. This was a military place, an area of discipline, of control and silence. Only outside the walls could you find the civilian settlements, and trading and commerce were done mostly outside the east gate.

The silence of this spot ended by the tenth century. The new burh of Chester was enlarged, and the walls now covered an area almost double that contained by the Roman walls. Now, the administrative centre was not just figurative, but was also on the actual topographical centre of the town.

Also its functions were new. The church of St Peter was described as 'de foro' in the eleventh century by Lucian. Now this was a place for trade, coming west from the harbour, east and north from the countryside, and even south, from Wales. The streets were filled with traders bringing their wares, Welsh pilgrims crossing from Bridge Street to visit the relics of the Holy Cross, and at this crossroad of the town, the market was placed.

"It is also worth understanding how fittingly it is that, all things being equal, a marketplace for the selling of things should be placed in the middle of the city, where, with an abundance of merchandise, particularly food available, a native or a foreigner may come to buy provisions."

These are the words of Lucian, a monk at St. Werburgh's writing in the twelfth century. He understands this crossroad as forming a perfect cross. Don't worry if you cannot see it; it is more of a figured cross than an actual one. The centre of the cross of Chester was as Jerusalem is the centre of the cross of the world. People not just from Chester, but also pilgrims and soldiers would gather here or just walk by. The market extended to the north but in this area bakers were found, along with dairy products and meat.

The town thrived as an economic and religious centre, a site for pilgrims and for merchants. It is not surprising that characters as Lucian try to connect these two main aspects of medieval Chester that come across this imperfect but rather perfect metaphor of the cross. As Lucian said, the perfection of the cross and the metaphors he used "come from love, not from quibbling"

