

The Rows, Chester

Saturday afternoon, 26 July

As a society, we are primarily interested in furniture, but we could not possibly visit Chester without investigating the Rows, with their timber structures and carved decoration which have been worked throughout the centuries from medieval to Victorian times. We were met by our three guides, John Wolfendon, Gerry Tighe and Steve Shakeshaft, who introduced us to the origin of the site – Roman Chester, or Deva, fortress of Legion II Adiutrix, nearly 2,000 years ago. At least half of the line of its defensive walls has survived and the present-day pattern of its streets is largely Roman too.

Chester's Rows are a unique system of elevated walkways that run through the fronts of buildings in the four main streets of the city. The walkways form covered galleries passing above the street level shops, giving access to a second tier of shops at first floor level. This Row system, developed by merchants in the 13th century on the site of the crumbling Roman buildings, provides cellar, house and shop space and has survived through centuries of rebuilding. Although Row buildings have many of the characteristics of medieval houses found elsewhere in Britain, nowhere else has this system of raised galleries.

Our walk concentrated mainly on Watergate Street and Bridge Street. We were somewhat surprised when our guide took us into a sofa shop, but our surprise turned to delight then we actually entered Leche House. This building is the best preserved medieval town house in the Rows. It dates from about 1375 and was partly rebuilt in the 15th, 17th, and 18th centuries. The stone undercroft retains a pair of ancient studded loading doors to the left of the shop-front. At Row level and above, the timber frame was rebuilt c.1475. The hall, open to the roof, retains an original fireplace. The central roof truss has a large Jacobean chandelier pendant. It was good to see the work of early craftsmen who featured emblems of animals and mythical beasts, interwoven with leaves, flowers and fruits in the plasterwork. These craftsmen also worked in stone and it would be interesting to speculate whether they were also responsible for early woodcarving. The stone squint with its wooden carved grille was both practical, as it gave the shop owner sight of his store, and architecturally pleasing. Squints are normally associated with churches: do we know of any other secular squints?

There are other fascinating buildings in Watergate Street where features including undercrofts, stone vaulting, rock-cut cellars and pegged wooden joints can be seen. Our guide took us to one of the conservation projects of the Chester Civic Trust, Bishop Lloyd's Palace, at 51-53 Watergate Row. This was originally two town houses built

over medieval undercrofts. The western part is dated 1615 and is one of the best examples of timber framing in Chester. The front gable displays an abundance of 17th century carving, including the legs of Man (for the bishopric), three horse's heads, and the arms of James I. There are also biblical scenes and heraldic beasts, including a castle and an elephant. Inside, the main feature is the ornate 17th century plasterwork which includes many interesting motifs – Tudor roses, horses, ships' wheels and starfish. The large decorated fireplace has the strange image of a cherub astride a lion. This symbolism has never been explained (ideas welcome).

We would like to thank our guides, John, Gerry and Steve for their sterling work in adapting their tours to our interests. For further reading, Andrew Brown's English Heritage Archaeological Report 16 on *The Rows of Chester* (ISBN 1 85074 629X) is recommended.

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