

## Chester Cathedral: Building timeline and significant historic events

### Pre Conquest

AD 79	Roman XX Legion founded the fort, known as Deva Victrix. Laid out as one of the largest forts in Britain, from later in the 1 <sup>st</sup> century it also had the largest known civilian amphitheatre in the province, seating between 8,000 and 10,000 people.
410	Though garrisoned by the XX Legion for almost 400 years the Romans had left by this date, leaving the Romanised Britons to contend with the neighbouring Welsh.
c.617	Invading Saxons defeated the local Welsh and settled Chester and the surrounding area
c.660 – 707	Lifetime of St Werburgh, daughter of King of Mercia, Anglo-Saxon princess and Christian nun.
689	King Aethelred of Mercia founded the minster church of West Mercia on the site now occupied by St John the Baptist's Church, later to become the city's first cathedral.
875	Body of St Werburgh brought to the church of St Peter and St Paul in Chester from Hanbury in Staffordshire, to escape advancing Danes.
c.907	St Peter and St Paul was enlarged for a college of secular canons and re-dedicated to St Werburgh after the city was fortified by Ethelfleda, sister of Edward the Elder, as a defence against the Danes.

### Post Conquest

1069	William the Conqueror consolidates his conquest of England in the Harrying of the North and crushes resistance from Edgar the Atheling and King Malcolm of Scotland. A motte and bailey castle was built in Chester at this time, being rebuilt in stone by Henry III in 1245.
1075	Rebuilding of St John the Baptist's church in the Norman style was begun by Peter de Leya, first Norman Bishop of Mercia, who made it his cathedral, but was superseded by Litchfield under subsequent Bishops.
1092	Hugh Lupus, Earl of Chester, founded a Benedictine Abbey on the site of St Werburgh's church. Parts remaining from this first Norman period are on the north side of the cathedral, particularly around the cloister
1140	Norman bays survive from this date in the North-western corner of the nave, now used as the baptistery.

- 1205 Appeals for funds were made and a great period of rebuilding took place in the early thirteenth century, the enlarged choir recorded as completed by 1211. The Chapter House was rebuilt between 1250 and 1260 and the Lady Chapel 1260-1280.
- 1270 Work on the present Choir continued until 1320, with delays caused by Edwards activities in Wales and particularly the building of his numerous Welsh castles which not only took up the attention of the Abbey's master mason Richard the Engineer, a castle specialist, but probably also many masons and other tradesmen.
- 1277 In July Edward I marched from Chester into Flint, Rhuddlan and on to Deganwy as the first part of his campaign against Llewellyn, a treaty was signed that year, but the resulting agreement foundered and Edward again marched out of Chester in 1282, this time as part of a three-pronged attack which, by 1283, succeeded in the defeat and annexation of the Welsh Prince's territories.
- 1330 The crossing and first bay of the nave were completed by this date
- 1340 A magnificent free-standing shrine to St Werburgh was made, followed by the greatly enlarged south transept, since much altered.
- 1354 Work of the rest of the nave was begun; the nave and transept clerestories plus the tower were completed from the late 1380s. Although the whole structure was prepared for vaulting only parts of the East end and a single bay of the South transept aisle were so roofed, the rest of the roofing was carried out in timber, in imitation of stone.
- 1380 The new Early Decorated period choir was completed with what Alec Clifton Taylor describes as '...superb stalls with 48 misericords surpassing those at Lincoln and Beverley in delicacy and grace.'
- 1509 Foundations of a South-west corner tower were laid but the tower never completed to any height. Between 1525 and 1537 the aisles of the choir were extended to the East, around the Western half of the Lady Chapel, forming a retrochoir.

## The Reformation

- 1541 Under Henry VIII a series of new sees was decreed (26<sup>th</sup> July) with Chester included amongst four former Benedictine Abbeys selected to become new cathedrals. The last abbot, Thomas Clarke, was elected in 1538, he surrendered the abbey in 1540 and became the first [dean](#) of the new cathedral, at the head of a secular [chapter](#) in 1541. Much of the range of ancillary monastic buildings survived the change to cathedral status.
- 1636 The consistory court was set up and constructed within a shell of 1508 masonry.
- 1642 Start of the English Civil war when Charles I raised his standard in Nottingham, the war lasted until 1651.
- 1645 On 20<sup>th</sup> September Parliamentary forces began to besiege the Royalist stronghold of Chester, on 23<sup>rd</sup> September Charles entered the city and the next day was able to witness part of the Battle of Rowton Heath two miles away. The Royalist forces



were defeated and the remnants retired within the city walls, Charles left on 25<sup>th</sup> September leaving orders for the city to hold out as long as possible. The starving soldiers and citizenry surrendered in May 1646 and there was much plundering and destruction and Chester was amongst those cathedrals that suffered substantial damage during this period. The town of Chester was largely rebuilt after the war.

As well as destruction in the Civil War, Chester is one of the cathedrals with the misfortune to be constructed largely of friable New Red Sandstone. It is considered by some authorities that the cathedral architecture has further suffered under the extensive restoration schemes that were necessary by the time of the Victorians, after much neglect in the eighteenth century.



Roman  
Saxon  
Norman  
Gothic  
Tudor  
Stuart