

'Hidden Histories' of the First World War in Chester

A WALKING TOUR

Department of History &
Archaeology



University of
Chester



OUR
CENTURY
1921-2021

Project Work from Second Year History students on the,
'Historical Research: Methods and Practice' module

About this guide...

- Thank you for downloading our walking tour on the 'hidden' histories of the First World War in Chester.
- This guide was co-created by Professor Tim Grady & second-year History students, as part of their research methods and practice module, including:
 - Eleanor Procter
 - Chloe Pritchard
 - Dylan Gash
 - Charlotte Price
 - Keely Pearce
 - Emilia Gaulton
- The students carried out original research for each stop on the tour, and wrote up their findings.
- We hope you enjoy reading the guide, and finding out more about Chester and the First World War.
- Find out more about our work in the History & Archaeology Department at the University of Chester:
<https://www1.chester.ac.uk/departments/history-and-archaeology>
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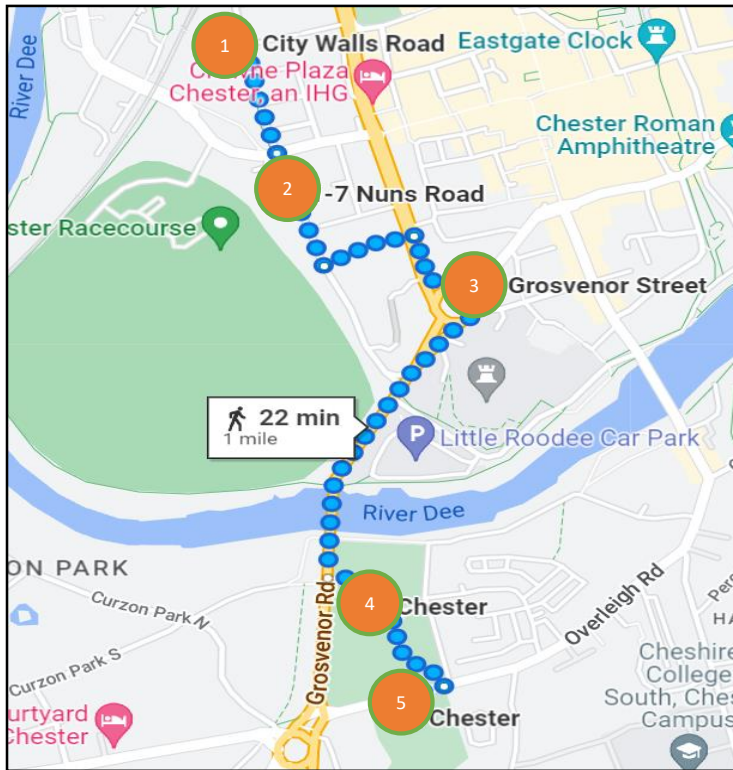


Let the PAST be your FUTURE

Department of History
and Archaeology



The Route



1. Royal Infirmary Building, City Walls Road:
 - ❖ Nursing in Chester during WWI.
2. The Racecourse, Nuns Road:
 - ❖ Internment Camps
3. Grosvenor Museum, Grosvenor Street:
 - ❖ Enemy Aliens and World War One.
4. Overleigh Old Cemetery, Grosvenor Road:
 - ❖ Belgian Refugees in Chester
5. Overleigh New Cemetery, Overleigh Road:
 - ❖ Remembering The War Dead



Chester and the First World War

Like much of Britain, Chester was forever changed from the devastation of the Great War. This tour highlights the different roles Chester played during these turbulent years. It focuses in particular on the experience of minorities and those on the margins of society during the war years. As such, the tour reveals a 'hidden history' of Chester's recent past.



Site One: Chester Royal Infirmary

Chester Royal Infirmary, once the city's main hospital, was founded in 1755. During the First World War, the Infirmary had to turn its attention to treating wounded and sick soldiers. It opened with 140 beds for military personnel, but at its peak in 1917 had over 600 soldiers being treated. The severity of wounds, and the number of cases, put a huge strain on the Infirmary, which resulted in more staff – including volunteers – being recruited.

During its time as a war hospital, the Infirmary became a microcosm of a global war. Soldiers from across the world were treated in Chester, including from Canada, Australia and Ireland, as well as from Germany. As one example amongst many, in 1917, a Canadian soldier, Frank Ball, was taken into the hospital suffering from a gunshot wound to his leg. Unfortunately, Ball died from his injuries in May 1917.

England N° 9. — Dyffryn Aled. Ansicht des Offiziersgefangenenlagers mit Spielplatz.



Site Two: Internment Camps

During the First World War, all of the belligerent powers took the enemy prisoner and thus needed to find spaces for internment. By May 1915, the British already held 26,900 prisoners of war, a number that rose continually. North Wales and Cheshire housed major internment camps at Queensferry, Handforth and Dyffryn Aled. To reach these, thousands of prisoners passed through Chester as a major railway hub.

Some German prisoners made even more frequent visits to Chester. Two officers, Lieutenant Hans Andler and Lieutenant Friederich Rudolf Von Sandersleben had first passed through the city on the way to the Dyffryn Aled camp. However, in April 1915, the pair hatched an escape plan and fled the camp. They were eventually captured, court martialled and returned to Chester Castle for trial. They were sentenced to 28-days internment without hard labour at HMP Brixton.



Site Three: “Enemy Aliens”

The declaration of war had a massive implication for German born civilians living in Britain, who were now termed ‘enemy aliens’. Fears of spying and questions of loyalty led them to be viewed with suspicion, even though many people had spent most of their lives in the country. From autumn 1914 through until May 1915, all males deemed to be ‘enemy aliens’ were gradually arrested and sent to internment camps.

In Cheshire, some German and Austrian civilians living in and around Altrincham were sent to Chester to be dealt with by the military authorities. Other residents were accused of being an enemy, even though they had been born and brought up in Britain. This was the case of Walter Gooch Schröder, principal of Chester School of Art, who took his accuser to court for malicious slander.



Site Four: Belgian Refugees

Some 250,000 Belgian refugees fled to Britain after German troops invaded Belgium in August. The refugees were distributed throughout the country, with small numbers to Chester itself. A group of locals met the first Belgians, from Mechelen, at Chester railway station. A Cheshire War Relief Committee, based in Foregate Street, also worked in the city to provide support for the refugees.

Two Belgians also died in Chester during the war. Constant Wauters, a soldier, died from meningitis in March 1915. He was given a spectacular public funeral in the Overleigh Cemetery. Marie Verbinnen, who was buried alongside Wauters, had arrived in Chester in 1914 along with her two sons and five daughters. Heavily involved in fundraising, she formed deep roots in the city, but died from a heart attack aged 68 in 1918.



Site Five: The War Dead

By the end of the war, 8,413 men from the Cheshire Regiment had died, but only 40 of them are buried in the Overleigh Cemetery. This is the result of a 1915 decision against repatriation of the dead. Most of the dead are buried in family plots, but some lie in a small military plot, which the War Office purchased during the war. At the end of the conflict, the Imperial War Graves Commission set out the graves with permanent headstones and plantings.

It is not only Cheshire men however that reside in the cemetery, there are 90 other dead from elsewhere in Britain, and from overseas, including one Canadian, two Australians and originally two German dead too. Of the Australians, one – Matthew Clayson – had been a munitions worker in Queensferry, but died of pneumonia in 1916. George McLarty, the second Australian to die, was a victim of a gas attack, and later succumbed to his injuries in Chester.