

Navigating Heritage and Accessibility in Chester, UK

SURP International Experience Award 2019

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This past April I had the chance to travel to Chester, UK with the support of the SURP International Experience Award. I chose Chester as my destination because of the City's success in integrating accessible features into what was originally a 1st century C.E. Roman fortress. By making accessibility a priority, Chester has seen an increase in tourism and recognition from the European Union's (EU) Access City Award in 2017. With all this in mind, I approached the trip with the question, how has Chester managed to balance the priorities of heritage and accessibility?



At level and ramp access at a cafe

Senior Access Officer and Community Initiatives

Before arriving in Chester, I was fortunate enough to speak with Graham Garnett, Senior Access Officer for the local council. He spoke to me about the importance Chester council has placed on accessibility, resulting in many community plans and initiatives. These have served as guiding documents and were an important factor in Chester winning the EU's Access City Award. Garnett said that the success Chester has had as an accessible city has led to business owners contacting him in search of accessible design guidelines. The result of this was noticeable downtown where many business entrances were at level. By committing to accessibility in their community initiatives Chester has been successful at integrating accessibility into heritage properties, resulting in interesting solutions which I will share below.

While in Chester I visited a variety of heritage properties ranging in type and location, offering examples of different solutions which could be translated to a Canadian context.

Chester City Centre Access Guide

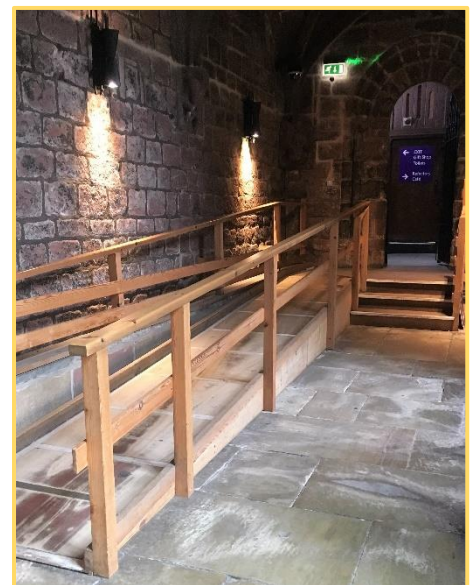
Before I started exploring, I made a visit to DIAL House, a local disability rights centre next to town hall. There I picked up a copy of the *Chester City Centre Access Guide*, which shows visitors accessible features throughout the city centre.

The Rows

My first stop on the trip was The Rows, an elevated shopping centre built in the Middle Ages which have been made fully accessible with access indicated in the *Access Guide*. This has been accomplished by installing ramps and at level access from the rear portion, with the historic stairs remaining at the front of the buildings.

Chester Cathedral

Continuing from The Rows I made my way to Chester Cathedral, dating to the 11th century. As I made my way through the cathedral, I noticed several smart and subtle accessible features ranging from ramps to lights to white lines on steps. These additions did not detract from the heritage and allowed visitors to easily navigate the space.



Wooden ramp installed in the cathedral, and discreet lighting on the walls



Stools available for visitors in the museum

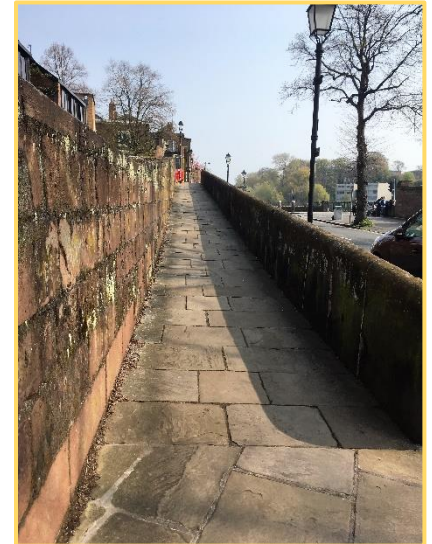
Grosvenor Museum

After leaving the cathedral I headed to Grosvenor Museum, located in a three-storey heritage building. The accessible features in this building could easily be translated to the Canadian context, with larger solutions such as an elevator to inexpensive solutions like complimentary stools.

Roman Walls

The next stop on my trip was the Roman Walls which encircle the city centre. The *Access Guide* once again proved helpful by showing me access points all along its length, indicating ramps and level access. Unfortunately, there were points which required stepped access to continue, but these were also indicated on the map so one could plan their route. Where there

were steps, the city has installed handrails and repaired old stone so that they are easier to navigate.



Ramp leading up to a section of the Roman Walls



Railing available for a hill in the park

Roman Gardens and Amphitheatre, and Grosvenor Park

Continuing the Roman theme, I made a stop at the Roman Gardens and Amphitheatre and the nearby Grosvenor Park. These were all fantastic examples of accessible solutions for outdoor heritage properties. The most noticeable feature of these locations was the maintenance and the design of pathways, which were smooth and did not require stairs. In steep locations, paths were designed in curved switch-back patterns or had a railing installed which complimented the design of the area.

After speaking with the Access Officer and visiting these locations, my main explanation for Chester's success at integrating accessibility into their heritage is due to their community commitment in the form of policies and initiatives. The effect these initiatives have had can be seen in the city, with both social and economic benefits and the fostering of innovative design solutions which can be translated to a Canadian context.

Getting the chance to travel and see how other communities are navigating their heritage and accessibility was a fantastic experience, and I cannot wait for the next adventure!

