

BORDER PLACES & LIMINAL SPACES

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Wherever you go in Chester, you can't escape the influence of the boundaries woven into the fabric of the city. Lying on the Welsh Border, it is encompassed by its famous Roman walls, flanked by the waters of the Dee, divided up by its Rows, and the four principle streets around which it was founded meet at a crossroads at its urban heart.

Boundary places are powerful sites, exerting endless meaning on the people and places that exist alongside them. They are symbols of self-perception, relics of lost worlds, monuments to change.

Boundaries act as vessels in which contrasting notions are conceived. They encourage us to define ourselves – “I am, we are” – and unite people behind a shared identity through a mutual sense of belonging. But, in doing so, they also encourage definition of that which is other – “we are, but you are not” – and lead us to mistrust those that live beyond our borders through a sense of instinctive hostility. After all, what Chester resident hasn't heard of the infamous, legendary by-law concerning the fate of Welshmen within the city walls after sundown...?

Boundaries are unruly things. If we could watch them through the centuries, they'd twitch and shift about, as though they're living creatures. They grow ever outwards from their point of origin, leaving their former incarnations behind like rings on a tree.

But then, boundaries can hide in plain sight too. Ever spotted the odd, little plaques on some of the city's old buildings? The ones with mysterious letters stamped on them? They are, in fact, the former parish boundary markers that once divided up Chester's devout flocks between their respective churches. These forged riddles finally reveal their secrets: S.O.P – St. Olave's Parish, S.M.L.P – St. Michael's Parish, etc.

Now and then, boundaries converge around a single object which somehow exists independently of them all. For hundreds of years, in front of the gatehouse of the city's original castle, the mysterious Glover's Stone once stood. No one knows exactly where this large lump of time-worn bluestone came from, but it seems to have played a pivotal role in Chester's law system, marking a curious patch of no man's land that fell outside the authority of the city liberties.

Previously standing somewhere near the site of the modern-day Golden Eagle pub on Castle Street, the stone was a judicial grey area where sentenced criminals were handed over to Chester's Sheriffs and where traders could technically sell >>

their wares without paying taxes. Nowadays, what's thought to be the Glover's Stone sits unassumingly in the Water Tower Gardens, its days of waging borderless anarchy long behind it.

When boundaries relocate, the invaluable thresholds within them are suddenly rendered useless and become obscured by the passage of time. The ancient Wolf Gate on Pepper Street allowed throngs of people in and out of the city walls for nigh on a millennium. Now, superseded by its more grandiose and car-friendly 20th century counterpart, even the road that once ran through it is no more, and the Wolf Gate is just an overlooked gateway in a shadowy corner, detached from the roar of daily life that passes by only yards away.

There are some thresholds that have remained behind even when the boundary walls that upheld them are no more. Walk a little way up Northgate Street and you'll see a forlorn section of age-old gateway leading absolutely nowhere in particular. This stone portal once belonged to the vast Abbey of St Werburgh that dominated the site here before the Cathedral itself was built.

Though some gateways and boundaries remain behind, others dissolve away entirely and linger on in name alone, bound, ghost-like, to a place after having long ago ceased to exist at all. Each day, hundreds of people hop off the bus at the spot known as The Bars, on Foregate Street, without giving the place a second thought. Derived from the Old French barre (as in 'a barrier' and 'bar the way'), this was formerly the name of an ancient postern gate that stood here until it was demolished in the late 18th century, having sadly crumbled from invaluable defence to an impractical nuisance.

Living surrounded by this jigsaw map of boundaries old and new allows us a unique insight. They remind us of loss, but, most vitally, of growth too.

In an age where building walls and strengthening borders is still at the top of political agendas, perhaps Chester acts as a symbol of braver ideals. Its ancient walls were built to keep people apart, but, for generations now, the gates of the city have remained open to new faces, new influences, new perspectives, open to people and ideas that will continue to reshape Chester and pave the way for its future. 