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**Medieval Town Walls as a Tourist Resource:
Dublin and Chester – a Comparative Study**

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MEDIEVAL TOWN WALLS AS A TOURIST RESOURCE: DUBLIN AND CHESTER - A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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‘Beautiful city...whispering from her towers
The last enchantments of the Middle Ages’.

Matthew Arnold, 1865.

Introduction

Ireland has a large number of towns where significant elements of their medieval walls survive to the present time. The City of Londonderry, for example, has its wall almost totally intact, while Athenry and Fethard are two lesser known examples where again virtually the entire lengths of their respective town wall circuits can be seen today (Thomas, 1992). Despite this, surprisingly little has been achieved in the utilisation of these town walls as a tourist resource. This is in contrast to walled towns elsewhere, such as Avila in Spain, Aigues-Mortes in France and Caernarvon in Wales, where defensive walls have been exploited as very successful visitor attractions (Morris, 1994).

This paper aims to explore this neglected aspect of tourism potential in Ireland by reviewing two contrasting case studies: the cities of Chester in the north of England and Dublin in Ireland. In the case of Chester, the wall walk along the virtually intact medieval town walls acts as a major tourist attraction, while in Dublin, the surviving sections of the town wall offers considerable - but as yet undeveloped - tourist development potential. The impetus for the study emerged from the Dublin Walking Forum and the resource material has been drawn from the substantial body of published works, historical cartographic evidence, and personal field observations. The work is not a detailed action plan but a conceptual introduction which considers the feasibility of establishing a walkway around the circuit of Dublin's medieval walls. In terms of format, the success of the Chester walls is reviewed first and this is followed by an analysis of the surviving elements of medieval Dublin and their potential for the establishment of such a walking route.

Chester

The city of Chester is located on the north bank of the River Dee, in northern England, where the river acts as the border with the adjoining territory of North Wales. The city was originally a Roman foundation which dates from the second half of the first century AD and consisted of a characteristic Roman grid-iron plan which was laid out on the level terrain of the river bank. Internally the layout consisted of a major cruciform axis supported by a network of lesser streets, all enclosed by a masonry wall. Directly to the south-east was the amphitheatre and immediately east of the town wall lay the harbour (Morris, 1994).

During the latter part of the fourth century the Roman garrison was withdrawn and the town declined to a level of near desertion. By the tenth century the city seem to have recovered under Saxon influence, only to decline again from the force of Viking raids. Following the Battle of Hastings, Chester came under the control of the Normans and entered a period of redevelopment and growth. The old Roman grid was expanded to the south and west and a castle was built in the south-west corner. In addition, the Roman wall was strengthened and a new section built to protect the expanded area. Throughout the following centuries the city continued to thrive, although the fabric suffered considerable damage during the Civil War, which was later repaired. During the Victorian period Chester became a fashionable visitor destination and much of the city was remodelled. The city walls were restored, but the town gates were removed and replaced with wide arches so that the continuous wall-walk could be retained. At the same time, a good deal of the medieval fabric was replaced by a Tudor-Revival style of dark painted wooden frame buildings. Notwithstanding this remodelling, a significant number of the city's medieval buildings survive, including, a range of sixteenth and seventeenth century wooden-framed houses, the Cathedral, and a number of other Gothic churches (Speakman, 1995).

Wall Walk

The red sandstone medieval walls are one of the outstanding features of Chester and remain a potent visitor attraction. The walls are of intrinsic interest in themselves; but in addition they offer spectacular views of the city spaces, its architecture, and the surrounding landscape. The virtually unbroken circuit stretches for about three kilometres, encloses the historic core of the city and is punctuated by a series of archways and mural towers. The archways allow vehicular traffic to pass through the wall and at the same time permit the walkway to pass overhead uninterrupted. The wall is about two meters wide and rises, on occasion, to a height to over thirteen meters above the street level. The walkway itself is paved and flanked by parapets on the outer edge and a protective railing on the town side. Access is provided at regular intervals along the wall by means of steps and ramps, thus making it accessible to all. The route itself is well marked and descriptive notices highlight specific features and views. A range of visitor services, such as car parking, restaurants, cafe, and toilets are provided at intervals adjacent to the wall, although with the policy of limiting signage, the walker is often required to consult a guide map to locate these services (Chester Corporation).

The views from the wall constantly vary, as the perspectives change in direction and height. Starting at the northern section and travelling in a clockwise direction the following can be seen outside the walls: the Victorian canal and its harbour, the Roman park and amphitheatre, the meander of the River Dee, the Victorian metal bridge, the quay walk, the town bridge, the racecourse, the site of the old harbour and its protective wall, and the surrounding Cheshire and Welsh countryside. Looking inwards, the walker can see vibrant city streets, landscaped open spaces, busy shoppers and visitors, the Gothic cathedral and churches, half timbered medieval buildings, the brick Georgian and black and white Victorian housing, and an array of Victorian public buildings and monuments.

Today, Chester with its wall top walk is a major tourist centre. This was so even in 1724, when Defoe described the walls as offering 'a very pleasant walk round the city, upon the walls, and within the battlements, from whence you may see the country round' (Speakman,

1995). The question to be considered in this study is: could an equal experience be created in Dublin, where a similar topographical aspect, stretches of the city wall and a range of medieval buildings exist? To assess this possibility two major points must be considered. First, is there sufficient medieval material - in terms of the city wall and adjacent architecture - to warrant the establishment of a walk. Secondly, is there ample access to, and around, the wall to accommodate a walking route. Before looking at these, however, it is necessary to understand a little of the development forces which shaped medieval Dublin.

Medieval Dublin

The city of Dublin was founded on the estuary of the River Liffey, at a point where its tributary, the Poddle, dog-legs before it joins the main stream. Here on a natural rectangular promontory, formed by the intersection of the two rivers, the Vikings established a settlement which, by about 1100, consisted of a sub-rectangular area defended by a defensive wall on all sides, with the addition of the river courses which acted as an outer defence line (Thomas, 1992, pp 79-93).

In 1170 the city was taken by the Anglo-Normans and they set in motion a development programme. Initially, the rectangular Viking form of the city was retained, but the walls were strengthened. At the same time, a system of town gates and mural towers was incorporated. In addition, the bank of the Liffey was pushed northwards and a new area of reclaimed land was added to the northern side of the original settlement. This new area was also walled, but the original wall which separated the two sectors was retained (Bradley, 1992). All of these works were probably completed by about 1500, although the earliest cartographic publication to illustrate this is John Speed's map of 1610. This map clearly shows the morphology of the town as it existed at that period, although the line of the internal dividing wall is absent. Despite this, Speed's map offers an accurate impression of the walled city of Dublin in the late medieval period (Fig 1).

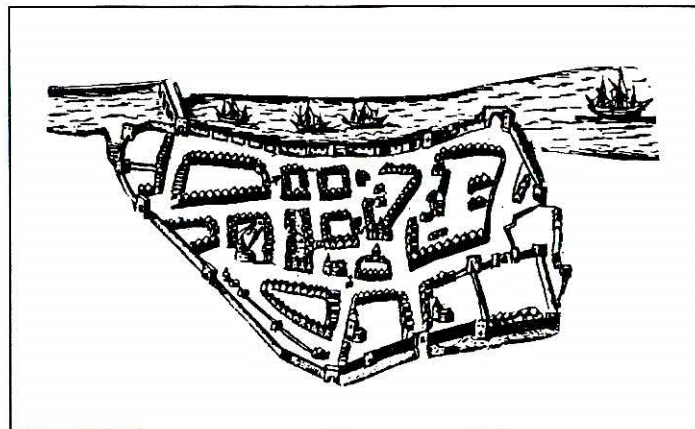


Figure 1: **Dublin c.1610**

Inside the city walls, the city architecture consisted of the massive Dublin Castle in the south east corner, Christchurch cathedral positioned at the intersection of the two major street axes, a number of medieval parish churches and religious houses, and a range of tightly packed domestic stone and wooden houses. Today, only a shadow of this medieval morphology survives. This includes the medieval street layout, a number of medieval buildings and sections of the city wall.

Proposed Walkway

Returning to the feasibility of establishing a medieval walking route, it is suggested that there is a sufficient body of accessible medieval material to support such a proposal. This can be seen in Figure 2, where the medieval street pattern, the surviving medieval architecture and the surviving sections of the city wall are evident. Internally the surviving medieval street pattern consisted of a main cross axis – Castle/High Street and Winetavern/St Nicholas Street, which intersect at Christchurch place. Elsewhere the street pattern consisted of an irregular grid of minor streets and lanes (McCulloch, 1989).

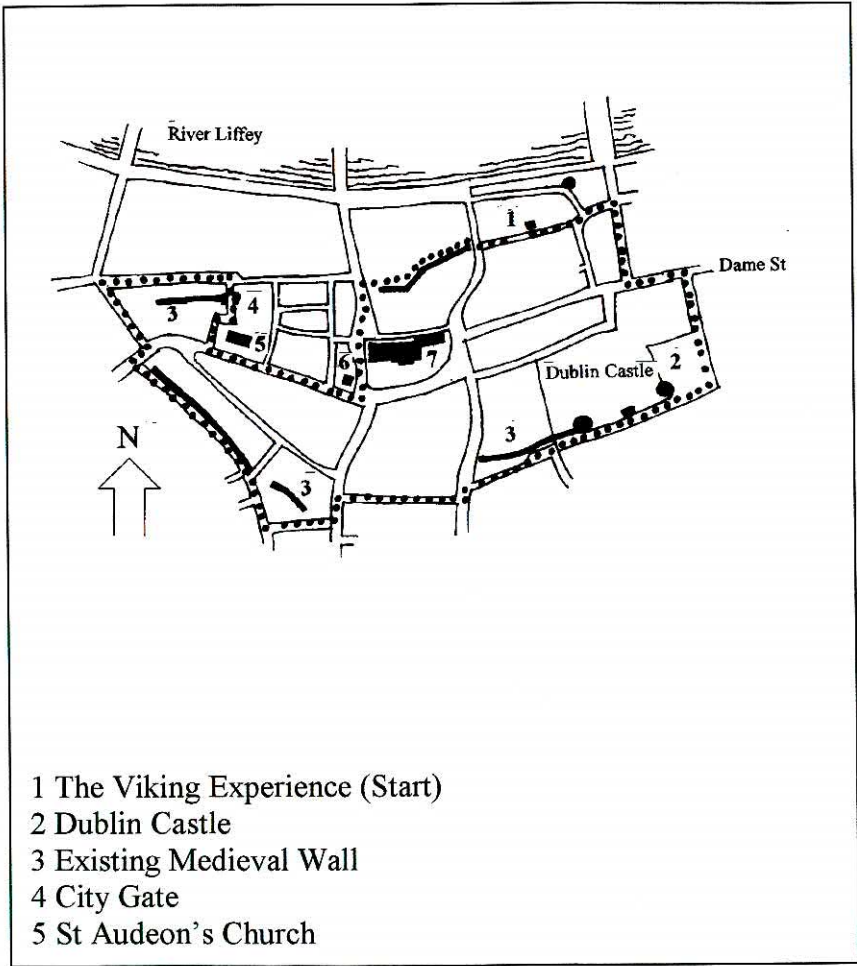


Figure 2: **Walking Route**

Within this matrix, the remains of Dublin castle can be seen located in the south-western corner of the city, while Christchurch cathedral is located in a primary centralised position. A little bit west of Christchurch, St Audeon's is the only parish church to survive within the city walls. Around the perimeter of the medieval city, the remaining sections of the city wall include the unbroken lengths along Lamb Alley and Ship Street Little. Inside the city, a section of the dividing wall and one of the gateways also survives in Cooks Street. In addition to the surviving medieval material, three other features would add support and interest to the route-way: the Viking Experience and museum, the 'Dyblinia' medieval Dublin exhibition, and the proposed new heritage centre. Taken together, these elements offer a dynamic base around which a walking tour could be laid out.

Figure 2, also, offers a suggested route for the walkway - a route which is dictated mainly by the line of the wall itself and by the fact that the bulk of the wall structure is in public ownership. In fact, an embryonic route already exists, with the exception of a few interruptions, where the wall enters private property, or other areas where sections have been removed in the past to facilitate traffic movement. Thus, with minor adjustments, the existing perimeter route could be formalised, so as to present an uninterrupted trail along, or immediately adjacent to, the wall line.

The obvious starting point for the walk is the Viking Experience in Essex Street. This centre offers details of the city's development during the formative Viking period and provides visitors with background information on the early urbanisation process which underpins the development of the Anglo-Norman city. On leaving the Viking Experience, the trail moves along Parliament Street and into Dublin Castle. Here, the wall and the castle can be traced to the south-east corner of the city. Following this, the route swings around the castle and follows the wall line along the southern and western edge of the medieval city.

Unfortunately, the quay section of the city wall has all now totally disappeared, and the trail is forced to change direction and follow the line of the dividing wall which separated the older Viking sector from the Anglo-Norman sector which was later added. The route follows the line of the dividing wall eastwards, passes through the only surviving town gate, swings around St Audeon's church, along High street, as far as the Dyblinia Centre. This exhibition is housed in the atmospheric Gothic-Revival annex to Christchurch cathedral, and offers the visitor a range of displays which highlight the historical, social, and mercantile aspect of medieval, Dublin. From the exhibition the visitor can pass through to the Gothic Christchurch cathedral. On the south side of the cathedral, the walker can rejoin the line of the town wall, which stretches through the site of the new Civic Offices and continues along Essex Street to the starting point at the Viking exhibition.

One of the difficulties in defining the continuous walking route is that portions of the wall have been removed. The section of the wall which traverses the Civic Offices precinct, for example, is now marked only by a veneer of stonework set into the paving. In other areas, as pointed out earlier, the city gates have been totally removed. The problem here is that visitors have a difficulty in interpreting the missing sections. One way of overcoming this drawback is to have the missing sections of the wall re-built. This would be a simple matter of re-

building the wall to its original height, where it passes through the site. Where the wall has been removed through the establishment of new streets lanes, such as at St Michael's Close, the wall could be re-built. The lane could be pedestrianised and a narrow gateway could be incorporated, so as to serve pedestrian traffic. Such an arrangement would not, of course, be possible on a major street where the wall has been breached, or where a gate has been removed. A typical example of this is Parliament Street, where the course of the city wall cuts diagonally across the eighteenth century street. In cases like this, the wall or the gate, could be marked by the erection of a pair of tall marker bollards in the footpath. Such a feature would not interfere with the vehicular traffic; but would clearly highlight the wall or the site of the city gate. However, it can be argued on theoretical grounds that it is inappropriate to attempt to re-build an historic feature that no longer exists. On the other hand, the reinstated section of the wall would make it easier for a walkers to follow the circuit, and fully appreciate the enclosure aspect of the original medieval wall.

Conclusion

The study has clearly demonstrated the viability of laying out a continuous walking route around the circuit of Dublin's medieval wall. In terms of product delivery, the proposed walking route would be able to offer a range of visitor attractions similar to those available in Chester. These include the walking route itself, the city wall, vistas of the river quays, and an introduction to the city's medieval, Georgian, Victorian, and twentieth century architectural experience. In terms of sustainability, the project could only help in encouraging an understand and appreciation of Dublin's medieval heritage.

The next stage in creating the project is to establish a formal development group who would be responsible for the practical on-site aspects of the proposal. The membership of this group could be drawn from a range of heritage, local authority, local history, community, tourism, and financial interests. The group's task would include the following:

- The completion of a detailed action plan for the project..
- Securing the necessary finance to implement the proposal.
- Activate the on-site operational mechanism to ensure the completion of the works.
- Set up a long-term administration to manage and maintain the walkway.

Such a group is currently being formed and the hope is that it will be operational by the close of 2001.

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