



BRITISH
ARCHÆOLOGICAL
ASSOCIATION

STUDY DAY: CHESTER CATHEDRAL

Friday 10 October 2025



Chester Cathedral Lady Chapel (photograph by Tom Parnell, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 4.0 licence)

Chester is a former Roman fortress town located on the River Dee. Its proximity to the Welsh border made it a key defensive site for the English monarchs, especially in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Many of the city's buildings were constructed using a distinctive red sandstone which can be found throughout the region, including the walls, castle and cathedral.

Chester Cathedral has a rich and complex history. Its origins may date as far back as the late Roman period, but the earliest phase of the present building dates to 1093, when Hugh Lupus, Earl of Chester, established a Benedictine abbey on this site. The building is nevertheless best known for its impressive Perpendicular architecture and innovative vaulting structures, which are the product of a long phase of rebuilding starting in the thirteenth century.

The earliest of these new Gothic structures are to the east of the cloister and include the rectangular Chapter House with its lancet windows and early tierceron vaults. These were followed by a more ambitious project to build a complete replacement for the abbey church's east end, starting with the new Lady Chapel. The rebuilding of the choir was a prolonged and disrupted process and continued well into the fourteenth century. The final stages of premodern rebuilding, which include the west front, the roof of the north transept and a revaulted cloister, date from the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Chester thus preserves architectural styles from across the Gothic period and is an especially rich repository of complex vaulting structures.

Today, Chester Cathedral is a vibrant community of worship, an archaeological treasure, a cultural hub, a centre of musical excellence and a unique blend of medieval and modern history.

While at Chester, study day attendees will be among the first to see the results of ‘Centring the Past: The People and Skills in Making Medieval English Vaults’ (University of Liverpool, AHRC IAA), a cross-sector project that bridges the divide between the abstract knowledge of historical craft and its practical application in Britain’s premodern builders. The morning’s workshops will demonstrate how textual evidence, digital analysis and lived experience have been used to investigate the lost carpentry involved in raising medieval vaults.

Following this, the group have an opportunity to explore material relating to the cathedral’s building fabric and vaults in-situ and in the library. Discussion will focus on how interdisciplinary approaches can inform the understanding, conservation, and the care of built heritage, and what role experimental archaeology can play in our research. Throughout the day, there will also be opportunities to engage directly with full-sized and scale reconstructions of thirteenth-century vaults and timber formwork as well as talk with the craftspeople involved with the project.

Programme:

10:00	Delegates arrive in Abbey Square, Chester Cathedral, before moving into nearby 30 Werburgh Street for tea and coffee.
10:30-11:00	Welcome to the cathedral by Canon Rosie Woodall (Vice Dean, Chester Cathedral). Introduction to the Study Day by Dr Alex Buchanan (University of Liverpool; BAA President) and Dr Richard Plant (BAA Secretary).
11:00-12:00	Session 1: Introduction to the Centring the Past project, led by Glenn Cahilly-Bretzin (University of Liverpool). A discussion on the intersections between academic research, digitisation, practical knowledge and experimental projects.
12:00-13:00	Session 2: Cultures of Care at Chester Cathedral: A roundtable with Chester Cathedral Clerk of Works, Collections Manager, and others.
13:00-14:00	Lunch break. Lunch is not provided, but Café 1092 in the Refectory at Chester Cathedral has a good range of sandwiches and lunch options. The city centre is immediately outside the Cathedral.
14:00-15:00	Tour of Chester Cathedral Tower and discussion of the ground floor architecture, led by Alex Buchanan and Richard Plant, and Chester Cathedral guides.
15:00-16:00	Behind-the-scenes visit to the Cathedral Library for a session with the Cathedral collections, led by Emily Lanigan-Palotai (Collections Manager, Chester Cathedral).
16:00-16:30	Concluding remarks

The study day will conclude at 16:30, but delegates are invited to stay for Evensong at 17:30.

Applications

The cost of the day will be £25 for BAA members. The event is free for students, for whom travel grants (to a maximum of £50) are also available. Student applicants do not need to be BAA members.

Places are limited to 20, of which up to 10 are reserved for students.

To apply please e-mail studydays@thebaa.org by **12th September 2025**. Please state in the email whether you are a member of the BAA or a student. All names will be entered into a ballot for the study day, and the successful applicants will be notified by 19th September 2025.

Travel and practicalities:

Chester Station is served by regular trains from Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Crewe, Birmingham and London Euston.

The cathedral is a 20-min walk from Chester train station (see map below). There are regular buses that run from the station to the city centre.

Map: Chester train station to Abbey Square (meeting point)

