Norman Walk: Gloucestershire: The City of Gloucester

Introduction

Start: Gloucester Cathedral
Finish: Site of Castle then back to Cathedral
Distance: 2.5 miles, approx 1.5 - 2 hours

Come with us on a walk through ancient Gloucester and follow in the footsteps of William the Conqueror. The city was one of Britain’s most important places in the decades after the Battle of Hastings in 1066. Our Norman history echoes through the streets and dotted through the city are fascinating sites and fine structures which will transport you back nearly 1,000 years.

Along the way you’ll follow the route taken by Britain’s first Norman king as he entered the city with his entourage and you’ll stand on the spot where the Domesday Book was commissioned. Gloucester is steeped in history and at almost every turn another chapter of England’s heritage is opened.

On this walk you’ll witness the changes brought about by the Norman Conquest and see for yourself the first steps in the building of modern Gloucester. As you wander through the grounds of a peaceful park you’ll glance upon the remains of a medieval leper chapel. You’ll visit the earliest church in the city and see the oldest surviving library building in the land. Meanwhile, who can resist reaching out and touching the finely carved Norman doorway which today goes almost unnoticed in the heart of a bustling 21st century city centre?

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This mostly flat, circular walk will bring alive a momentous time in our nation's history; the last time England was invaded, the removal of the ruling classes and the crowning of a foreign king. It led to changes in the way we speak and the way we live our lives. And it's all here in the streets of Gloucester.

The starting point for your journey through Norman Gloucester is the jewel in the crown of the city and of the surrounding shire county. Gloucester can boast one of the world’s finest cathedrals and with it a spectacular example of Norman ambition and architecture. More formally known as the Cathedral Church of St Peter and the Holy and Indivisible Trinity, it has been a place of worship since Saxon times. The man to thank for founding this magnificent building is Serlo. He was the first Norman abbot, appointed by William the Conqueror and brought over from Normandy. When the original Saxon Abbey burnt down in 1088, Serlo needed no further encouragement and the foundation stone for his new creation was laid the following year. Just wander through the nave and you can see the original round Norman pillars at the base of the massive columns.

In the late 11th century, few places in England or Wales could rival Gloucester's royal, religious and civic power. Not only did William I hold his Witan (or Parliament) in the city at Christmas time but in 1085 it was followed by a church synod on the site of the cathedral. For many years it was claimed that the chapter house was the place where William ordered the Domesday survey. However, most historians now agree that the actual location was elsewhere in the city, as you'll discover later. There's also a tragic family connection to William I within the walls of the cathedral. On the south side of this magnificent building you'll find the tomb and the coloured wooden effigy of his son, Robert, Duke of Normandy. Robert was the victim of intense sibling rivalry; he was imprisoned in Cardiff Castle for 28 years by his younger brother, Henry I, and requested to be buried in Gloucester Cathedral.

From the Cathedral head west, walking around College Green, through the 12th century St Mary's Gate and a few yards beyond Bishop Hooper's Monument in St Mary's Square you’ll find another place of faith which the Normans knew well.

In the shadow of the mighty tower of the Cathedral stands the modest and unpretentious church of St Mary de Lode. It might be small but it’s of great significance. This is the oldest parish church in the city and it’s possibly the earliest Christian site in the area. Its origins are pre-Saxon and written records go back as far as the 11th century. We know the early church had a chancel, nave and a central tower which were destroyed by fire in 1190. Move your eyes up to the present church tower and you're looking at a typical Norman structure.

Excavations in the 1970s revealed a Roman mosaic floor beneath the nave. Fallen columns and evidence of a grand building indicate it might even have been a Roman Baths. Meanwhile Gloucester folklore claims that this was the final resting place of King Lucius in the second century.

It might seem unimaginable to us today, but the church was built beside a channel of the River Severn. That arm of the waterway has long since disappeared but the evidence is in the name of the church; 'lode' is a Saxon word meaning ford or river crossing.
3. St Oswald’s Priory

St Oswald’s Priory sits within a small open space close to the busy inner ring road. These are the oldest remains which exist above ground in Gloucester. The minster church was founded around 890 by Aethelflaeda, the daughter of Alfred the Great.

A single wall with a series of semi-circular Norman arches set in the original Saxon stonework has miraculously survived a thousand years of turbulent history. A local farmer is credited for its almost accidental conservation. He used the wall as a supporting structure for his cowsheds, thereby saving it from total ruin.

The priory is named after a seventh-century king and saint. Oswald of Northumbria was horribly dismembered after dying at the battle of Maserfield in 641. About 250 years later, Aethelflaeda stole some of his remains which were taken from Lincolnshire and reburied here. The bones were set in a shrine within the building and money poured in from the many pilgrims who came to pay homage.

The Normans enlarged the minster church and added side aisles. By the early 12th century it became a priory of Augustinian canons but in the following centuries it gradually fell into disrepair. During the Civil War parts of the priory walls were used to repair markets in the town which had been damaged in the Siege of Gloucester.

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4. Site of the Great Hall at Kingsholm

Leave St Oswald’s by the Priory Road exit, turn right and cross Gouda Way at the pedestrian crossing. Walk under the railway arch into Dean’s Walk and then Dean’s Way. On the right, between numbers 94 and 96 Dean’s Way, take the public footpath. After a few yards you’ll see an open space on your right. This empty, grassed area was once the scene of immense power and a building as influential as any in the land. This was the site of the Great Hall at Kingsholm; Gloucester’s royal palace. In the 10th century an impressive timber hall was built here on the site of a late Roman cemetery. The Great Hall was the centrepiece of a royal manor; housing the king, his court and attendants on his frequent visits to Gloucester when he held council in the city.

The Anglo-Saxon monarch Edward the Confessor would convene his council and exercise his power in three cities; Winchester at Easter, Westminster at Whitsun and Gloucester at Christmas. After the Norman invasion in 1066, William the Conqueror continued the tradition.

This is the birthplace of the single most famous piece of Norman history; the Domesday Book. It was while he was in Gloucester at the end of 1085 that William I demanded an inspection of all the land, property and wealth in his kingdom. It was a sort of 11th century census, or the first modern tax return, if you prefer. No one knows exactly where William ordered the undertaking of his mammoth survey but it was almost certainly here. Later William’s order was ratified at a meeting of church leaders in the Abbey of St Peter (now the cathedral). Interestingly the Domesday Book describes Gloucester as “a prosperous city of some 3,000 souls”. The original can be seen in the National Archives at Kew. The name of the royal residence lives on today and is especially well-known by sports fans. The original name Aula Regis (King’s Hall) is now universally spelt Kingsholm and the suburb shares its name with Gloucester’s famous rugby stadium.

5. Leper Hospital Chapel

Continue on the footpath, turning right at the end into Sandhurst Road, almost immediately right again onto Kingsholm Road then left into Denmark Road. This long, residential road climbs gently and eventually brings you to Hillfield House on the right. Enter the gates and you’re in Hillfield Gardens.

In one corner of the gardens stand the remains of the leper chapel of St Mary Magdalen. A leper hospital was established around 1150 by Roger of Gloucester, the Constable of the medieval Castle who was locally the second most powerful man after the King locally. Under the guidance of Lanthony Priory, the hospital was built to cater for local sufferers. The accommodation was on the opposite side of what is now London Road with a walk to the chapel of about 50 yards for the unfortunate inmates. Leprosy was a major health risk in medieval England but it’s worth remembering that the term encompassed all sorts of skin disorders.

The hospital and its chapel were built well outside the town and beyond the city gates, such was the fear of lepers spreading disease. A leper was allowed to beg on the streets but had to carry a wooden clapper to warn of his arrival. Time has been unkind to this beautiful little building. The nave became unstable and was taken down in around 1860 so that today all that survives is the chancel. However, it includes a wonderful Norman-style door arch with distinctive dog tooth and chevron patterns. Also look out for the carvings near the door on the west side; were these etched in to the stone by pilgrims as they reached the first religious building on their arrival in Gloucester?
Turn right onto London Road and head back towards the city centre. As you do this, you’re walking in the footsteps of William the Conqueror. We know that when he held his Witan, or Parliament, in Gloucester he entered the city through the Northgate so he must have made his approach using this route.

You’re surrounded by modern commerce and retail as you make your way through the heart of historic Gloucester along Northgate Street, over the Cross onto Southgate Street. Just beyond the statue of Emperor Nerva on the left is the church of St Mary de Crypt.

Facing Southgate Street is a worn and weathered arched Norman doorway. If you place your hand on the stone columns or reach up towards the carved arch, you’re making contact with the remnants of Norman Gloucester. There are Roman foundations on the site and the first church here dates from the 1140s. About 100 years later the church came under the control of nearby Llanthony Priory and over the centuries a series of alterations were carried out. The most recent changes took place in 1908 when the ornate pinnacles on the tower were removed for safety reasons. Under the western end of the church is a double barrel-vaulted crypt which once had its own access to the street. Surely this is evidence of a long-forgotten commercial sideline with the church letting the space to a tenant and raising much needed income.

The pioneer of the Sunday School movement, Robert Raikes, was both baptised and buried at St Mary de Crypt. The delightful little churchyard at the rear is worth a visit and a semi-circular bench, carved by visiting stonemasons, depicts gargoyles and other historical images.

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Continue down Southgate Street, turn right into Commercial Road, right into Ladybellegate Street then right again into Blackfriars (via Sacra). Now you’ve arrived at one of Gloucester’s historic gems and the most complete Dominican Priory in Great Britain.

The Dominican Order, or Black Friars, was founded in 1217 and they arrived in Gloucester in 1239, establishing a base on part of the site of the old Norman castle. King Henry III was a great benefactor to the city where he’d been crowned in 1216, and he helped the friars by giving them the land, money for the stonework and timber from the royal forests for the rooves, many of which survive today.

But Blackfriars has another claim to fame. It includes the oldest surviving library building in the country. The scriptorium was a place of learning and was the place where the monks diligently worked on their documents and created their illuminated manuscripts. The priory buildings included the church, cloisters and the dormitory.

From the Middle Ages through to the 20th Century, Blackfriars was a private residence and at one time a Tudor mansion. Over the years the buildings have housed a school, a cloth factory, a mineral water bottling plant and even a pub. Today the entire site is cared for by English Heritage which has carried out much of the recent preservation work.

Return to Commercial Road and turn right, then right again into Barbican Road and after a few yards there’s a rather nondescript car park. It might not be very inspiring today but 900 years ago this was the site of the Norman Castle of Gloucester.

Gloucester’s first castle was built shortly after the Norman invasion of 1066 and certainly in time to be included in the Domesday Book two decades later. This was a typical Norman fortification; a motte and bailey defence. The motte was a high earthen mound with a watch tower at the top while the bailey was the surrounding encampment of wooden and thatch buildings or outhouses protected by fences and a trench.

Why did the Normans build a castle here? Firstly they wanted to ensure control over the defeated Anglo-Saxons. They also needed to defend the city and the all important crossing of the River Severn at a time of political and military uncertainty. A castle was the symbol of the King’s authority and having fought so hard to put William I on the throne, they didn’t want to risk losing the crown.

Civilians were employed to carry out the more menial jobs at the castle but unlike the soldiers, they didn’t live there. At night they travelled back to their homes in a suburb of the city just outside the south gate. It’s the area we now call Littleworth. You could say they were the forerunners of today’s commuters.
The Norman castle didn't last long. By 1120 a new one had been built nearby on what is now the site of Gloucester Prison. This was a more impressive fortification with thick stone walls, a keep in the centre and a protective moat running around the perimeter.

From here it's just a short walk back to the cathedral. Continue up Barbican Road, over the crossing into Berkeley Street and within seconds you can see the cathedral's magnificent south porch.