

Georgian Architecture around St Martins, Leicester

Start location: Outside King Richard III Visitor Centre, 4A St Martins, Leicester, LE1 5DB

Finishes: Outside the City Rooms, Hotel Street.

Time taken: 15 minutes (approximately)*

Distance: 0.5 miles 0.8 km

Linear route

Allow additional time for information stops.

Description:

This short walk passes through the streets near the Cathedral Church of St Martin. We look at some of Leicester's buildings of the period between 1714 and about 1800, and dip into the history of Leicester's development during the Georgian era.



- Main route 1 Stage / waypoint ● A Point of interest

*Time is calculated at a steady pace of 2mph, if walked without stopping. Allow extra time to look at the points of interest and read the information.

This route was developed by staff and volunteers for Leicester City Council:

www.choosehowyoumove.co.uk/walks

Walk starts:

Outside King Richard III Visitor Centre, 4A St Martins, Leicester, LE1 5DB

Safety tips:

Take care crossing roads and on the uneven cobbles of St Martins West and East. Remember to observe the guidance on social distancing.

Introduction:

We will look at some of Leicester's buildings of the period between 1714 (the accession of George I to the throne) and about 1800. The town then was confined more or less within the limits of the present city centre. By 1800 the population was about 20,000. Leicester was expanding but on the cusp of a bigger phase of growth after about 1820. So Georgian Leicester was a county town serving Leicestershire as a trading and business centre. But it had a growing industrial base connected with the hosiery trade, which came to Leicester late in the 17th century. We are lucky in Leicester to have an observant and delightful guide book to the town in 1804. *A Walk through Leicester* by Susanna Watts gives us a clear description of the town at the end of the period covered by this walk.

Georgian Leicester wasn't a pretty costume drama. Modern sewers were not built until the second half of the 19th century and human waste was taken away in carts during the night. Animals, with the attendant mess and smells, were driven into the town to be bought and sold at the cattle market on the site of the present Town Hall. The Borough Records reveal constant disputes about the responsibility for street maintenance and other accounts recall stand-offs between rival gangs at election time.

Route directions:

Note - detailed information about the places of interest we pass can be found at the end, after the directions.

1. With your back to the KRIII Visitor Centre, look to your right across the pedestrianised space to the building diagonally opposite you.

[A] 21 St Martins. Early 18th-century house, probably from the 1720s or 1730s.

Turn left along St Martin's and continue ahead as it becomes Peacock Lane. Turn right onto Applegate and a short distance up the road stop at Wygston's House, on the left.

[B] Wygston's House. The attractive brick building on Applegate is a Georgian addition to the medieval timber-framed house.

2. Turn right on Guildhall Lane, pass the Guildhall then turn right on St Martin's West. Pass the Cathedral then stop to look left across the Cathedral gardens for a view of the tall narrow building on the far side.

[C] View of 5 St Martins East. The essence of a small Georgian town house. You may want to take a closer look before continuing (but remember this is a private residence).

At the end of St Martins West turn left on Peacock Lane (or if you diverted to look at [C], turn right at the end of St Martins East) then cross over the road to enter New Street. Continue to the end.

[D] New Street. From the mid-13th to the 16th century, the Greyfriars' friary was sited here. After its dissolution in 1538, the estate passed through several owners with the subsequent development of a fine mansion in the former grounds. New Street itself was built during the Georgian era allowing plots for other buildings. Look at number 16 and refer to the detailed notes.

3. Turn right on Friar Lane for a short distance to take in the buildings, including numbers 18-28.

[E] Friar Lane. The development of the Greyfriars site created a new fashionable area in town which attracted businesses and professionals. Friar Lane is the city's most complete and consistent Georgian street.

Turn back along Friar Lane and pause to look at number 17.

[F] 17 Friar Lane. Built around the 1760s, this house features several fashionable Georgian architectural details.

Continue on Friar Lane then turn right onto pedestrianised Hotel Street.

4. Stop outside The City Rooms, on your left.

[G] The City Rooms. Built between 1792 and 1800, this beautiful building (designed by John Johnson) is now Grade I listed. When it first opened it functioned as the town's assembly rooms to host balls and functions. There is an information board nearby but do also refer to the information at the end of this route.

The walk finishes here. We hope that you have enjoyed this short introduction to Georgian Leicester. There is much more to explore in New Walk and King Street and in the superb group of houses and gardens in Church Road, Belgrave. And of course Leicester has a rich architectural heritage from before and after the Georgian period.

Places of interest passed on route

[A] 21 St Martins.

We think of red brick today as Leicester's signature building material. But it was only in the Georgian period that it became widely used – made from clay dug up probably close to the site of the building. The earliest surviving three-dimensional red brick building in the city is Great Meeting Unitarian Chapel in East Bond Street, built in 1708. Belgrave Hall from 1709 is just a little later.

But let's look at 21 St Martin's. This is an early 18th-century house probably from the 1720s or 1730s. Georgian architecture came in various styles but this is what we think of as a Georgian town house. The window sizes are graduated and topped by small windows on the second floor. There is a central doorway with a richly decorated door surround to indicate the owners' wealth and prestige. As important is the overall sense of ease and harmony that comes from the Classical proportions of the doors and windows. These derive from Roman architecture distilled through the work of architects and theorists in the ancient Classical world, in the Italian Renaissance and by British architects such as Inigo Jones and Colen Campbell. But however these proportions were devised, they work: this is a lovely building. Notice also that the roof has a shallow pitch so that it is not conspicuous from the street so the eye reads the big projecting cornice as

the top of the building. Notice also how the windows are set into the brickwork close to the front face of the building.

[B] Wygston's House.

We are looking at the Georgian addition to the medieval, timber-framed Wygston's House. This was probably built about 30 to 40 years later than 21 St Martin's in the mid to late 18th century. It is a bit more elaborate and perhaps not quite so elegant. The ground floor windows have semi-circular arched heads and the windows above the doorcase have stonework decoration, probably in Danehills sandstone. The link with Roman architecture is hinted at more strongly here, with raised pilasters with decorative capitals flanking the principal bays (separating them from a service bay on the right).

The small-paned windows, a defining feature of Georgian houses, were necessary because it was not possible to make large panes of glass until about the middle of the 19th century. Later still small panes were used as a style feature rather than a technical necessity.

Notice also how the windows at Wygston's House are set back a few centimetres into the brickwork. The aim of this was to slow the spread of fire, still an ever-present threat in Georgian towns, across the face of the building.

[C] View of 5 St Martins East.

The essence of a small Georgian town house (just three windows wide). Simple and well-proportioned with an elaborate carved wooden doorcase. You may want to take a closer look before continuing but remember that this is a private residence.

[D] New Street.

The Greyfriars' friary, where Richard III was buried, was sited here from the mid-13th to the 16th century. It was dissolved in 1538. The estate passed through various hands and was in the ownership of the Herrick family of Beaumanor for many years. The Herrick family built a fine house fronting Friar Lane which stood long into the 19th century. In 1752 the estate passed to Mr Garle. It was probably Garle who laid out New Street and opened up sites for building on either side. These were big, square plots in contrast to the long, narrow units of the medieval town.

Number 16 New Street was probably built soon after New Street itself. There was once a number 18 but a road widening scheme in the 1920s led to the demolition of buildings on Peacock Lane up to New Street thus forming the step in the street frontage. Number 2 Peacock Lane was built as an extension to 16 New Street in neo-Georgian style in 1930 and together the combined building is now St Martin's Lodge, developed by the Diocese of Leicester as a boutique hotel.

The Greyfriars area has benefited from the Greyfriars Townscape Heritage Initiative since 2015. Funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, private owners and the City Council has aided the repair of buildings, new paving and the improvement of sites such as the car park behind 16 New Street, a site unbuilt on at least since the dissolution of the Greyfriars.

[E] Friar Lane.

The development of the Greyfriars site led to what we can still experience as a distinct Georgian quarter in the city centre. The area was fashionable and attracted the business and professional classes of the town. Not all the buildings are from the 18th century but many that are not are in complementary styles, some dating from the early 19th century like the white brick terrace at 18-28 Friar Lane. Despite containing buildings of varying ages Friar Lane is the city's most complete and consistent Georgian street.

[F] 17 Friar Lane.

One building that really catches the eye is number 17. Built around the 1760s for a local businessman and

later known as Dr Benfield's House 17 Friar Lane has everything. In the central bay there is an ornate timber doorcase; above it on the first floor is a Venetian window (an arched centre light with flat-headed side lights) and a Diocletian window (semi-circular with two vertical divisions) on the second floor.

It was common in the 18th century for builders to use pattern books, taking designs and details from a book to put together an overall scheme for their client. We cannot say whether this was the case with 17 Friar Lane but, with the evident urge to include a range of fashionable details, it has something of the appearance of pattern book building.

[G] The City Rooms

Whether or not 17 Friar Lane was based on a pattern book there is no doubt that City Rooms is real architecture. Fronted in fine grained sandstone the design of City Rooms plays with proportion, light and shade and movement. Miss Watts, whose book was published here, described what was then the Hotel (giving the name to Hotel Street) as 'the first modern architectural ornament of the town'.

It is also the first building on this walk for which we have the name of an architect. John Johnson was born in Leicester in 1732 so his career was well established, mainly in Essex and the south of England, by the time he built City Rooms between 1792 and 1800.

The big first floor windows light the ballroom, Leicester's most elegant interior, which would have hosted in Miss Watts' words: 'scenes of numerous and polished society'. Today City Rooms is an event venue restored in 2004-05 by local businessman Naresh Parmar. The ballroom is accessible only by appointment.

In terms of heritage protection City Rooms is one of less than 2% of listed buildings nationally that are listed in grade I: the best of the best.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Mike Taylor for developing and researching this route.