



Trail

A city of two halves

Explore how Lincoln's ancient past built a city of two halves

Time: 45 mins

Distance: ½ mile

Landscape: urban

Set in the plains of Lincolnshire on top of an unexpected hill, Lincoln is a city split into two halves with ancient and modern side by side.

This trail will lead us through the magnificent heritage hub of the city, discovering how the secrets of its hills and history have influenced the economy, society and tourism of this remote city.

Location:

Lincoln, Lincolnshire

Start:

Brayford Wharf E, Lincoln LN5 7AY

Finish:

Bailgate, Lincoln LN2 1QA

Grid reference:

SK 97358 71138

Practical Information:

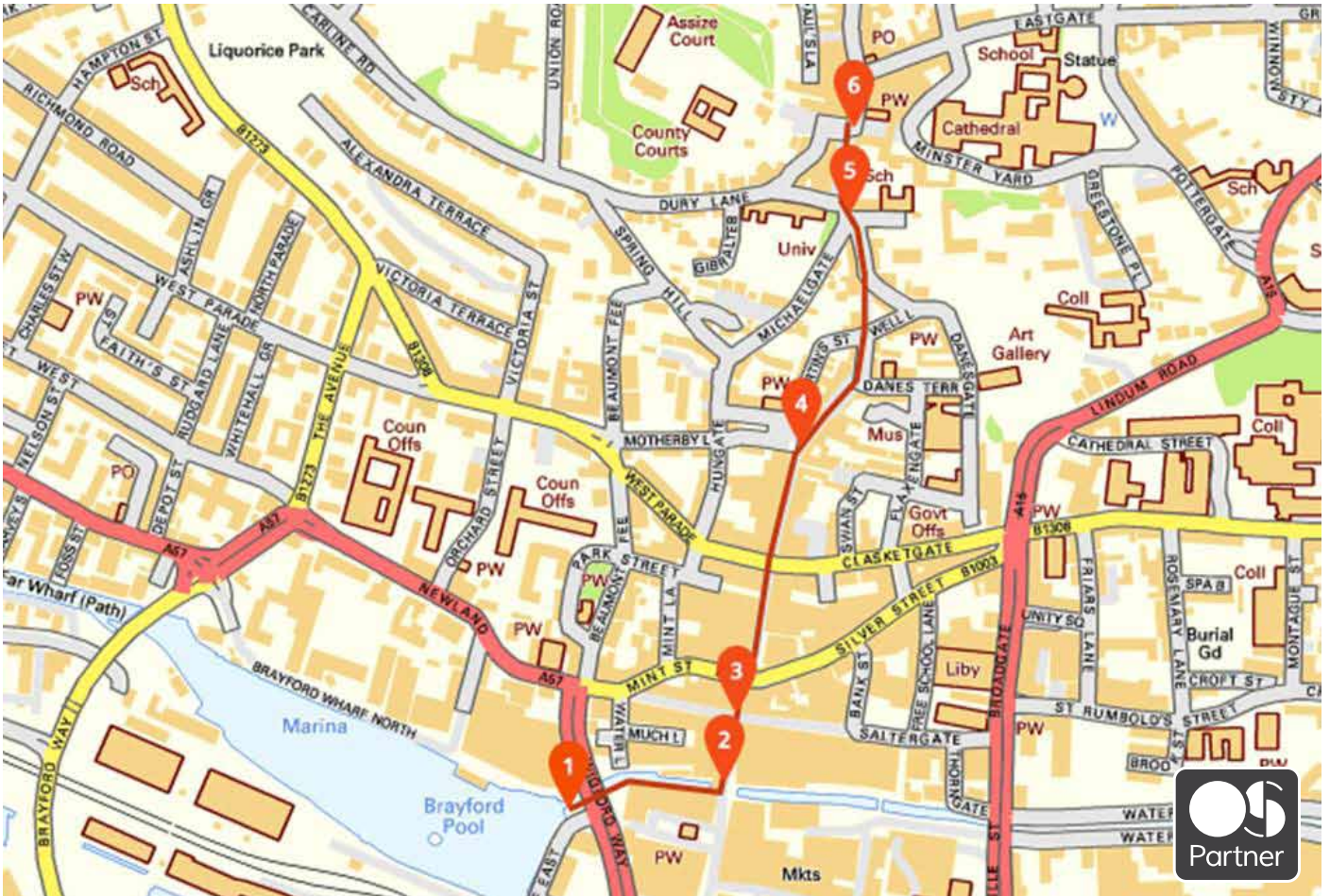
One short but very steep uphill section of cobbled paving – there are railings along its steepest part but when wet this can be slippery.

Keep an eye out for:

The mischievous Lincoln Imp – the mythical symbol for the city that crops up on door knockers, in gift shops and on the upper reaches of the Cathedral.



Route and stopping points



- 01 Brayford pool
- 02 High Bridge over River Witham
- 03 The Guildhall
- 04 The Strait
- 05 The Norman House
- 06 Castle and Cathedral

01 Brayford Pool

In front of us the expanse of Brayford Pool stretches out, lapping at the shores which house modern eateries, the university and the railway line. A busy waterfront of modern commercialism and an inland harbour dotted with boats and barges it could feel like any other riverside development. But the pool itself holds many clues to Lincoln's past and our trail begins at the very source of Lincoln's life.

Brayford Pool is a natural lake. It was formed when the River Witham, which flows through the city behind us, was artificially widened. It was here that in the 1st century BC, the first known settlement originated, the waterways providing invaluable transport routes and drinking water.

Long before the cafes and students, you can imagine how marshy lands would have stretched out from its banks on both sides. This meant that this was the one point where the pool and the winding River Witham could be crossed, enabling communications and transactions where elsewhere across the neighbouring landscape this was impossible.

The Romans saw the opportunity of the waterway and hillside backdrop in 48AD when they started to develop the area as a hill fort and commercial hub. Widening the river Witham on the far side of this lake created The Fosse Dyke canal - an incredible piece of Roman engineering that linked Lincoln to the River Trent and so gained all of the benefits of its cargo and trade. Clever thinking from the Romans!

Turning to look behind you, you can catch a glimpse of the city's make up - built up hillsides and a mighty cathedral sitting at its top, just as the Romans had planned. From here you can see what gives Lincoln its original name, Lindon: 'Lin' meaning pool and 'don' meaning at the foot of the hill. This view also shows us a city of two halves - with modernity and commerce located at its waterside base, and wealth and grandeur at its top.

The divide between the two is bigger than you might first imagine and has stood the test of time, so from here although the modern bridge reads 'Where have you been?' we will instead explore where we shall go!

Directions

Follow the river under the bridge and follow the banks until you reach some steps leading up to the high street from beneath a bridge with a timber-framed building upon it.

02 High bridge over the River Witham

Here we stand over the River Witham - the original life blood of the city. Look up to your left and you can see the shopping street wind away from us up towards ancient gates, and look to the right and the shops give way to the station, cinemas and industrial estates.

Looking back to the uphill slope of the city gives us more clues as to why Lincoln became strategically important. The higher land to the north nestles within hard Jurassic limestone hills offering a brilliant position of defence with views out over the flat lands below. When the Romans arrived, they recognized that geography had put Lincoln in a strategic position and they built the first bridge across the river to open up transport and trade routes right here.

With the fall of the Roman Empire around 5AD came the medieval period that endured for almost ten centuries, shaping the next stage of this historic city.. One incredible test of time is the building that rides the crest of this very bridge - the oldest medieval bridge in England with houses still upon it!

Many ancient bridges had shops and chapels - the old London Bridge is a famous example - but they rarely survived. This building was constructed in 1540, and suffered fire and restoration over the centuries. It was occupied in the early 1900s by Mr Stoke, a local greengrocer who had a passion for fine teas and coffees. Stokes is now a city-wide institution. It still inhabits its bridge-top location serving drinks and cakes to locals and tourists alike on the dividing point between the low-lying and hillside halves of the city.

Directions

With Stokes café in front of you turn right and follow the road northwards up hill slightly and stop at the large stone gateway across the road.

03 The Guildhall

Standing here you might ask why is this grand stone gateway here in the middle of a busy high street?

It is impressive in itself, but importantly for us as we trace the development of Lincoln, it marks the position of the south gate of the Roman town. When the Romans arrived they recognized that Lincoln had all the makings of a regional capital. Although little remains of the Romans settlement of 2000 years ago, they marked out the basic pattern of the city today- the route we are following here.

As we have seen, they built canals and the first bridge across the river, but they also established a network of new roads across Britannia (as it was then).

Two of them, Ermine Street (London to York) and Fosse Way (Exeter to Lincoln) joined just below where we stand now. The south Gate of the city was therefore in an incredibly important location to welcome and deliver trade and people not just across Lincoln, but across the whole country!

It is through these stone arches that we will now pass through to discover more secrets about Lincoln's Roman past and how it affects the cityscape we see before us today.

Directions

Pass through the Guildhall, go straight on passing over the first and then the second crossroads at Clasketgate. As you proceed uphill, take the right fork under the iron archway of The Strait. Stop here next to the archway information board on your left.

04 The Strait

Take a moment to experience the change in pace between the lower levels of the city we have just wandered through and the cobbled streets of The Strait that lie ahead. We move from wide open roads to a winding slender street - the importance of this is about to become clear.

Look above and you will notice an ornate arch welcoming you to The Strait. The placard on the wall provides a great explanation of the imagery within the iron arch above. Look out for Roman symbols depicting the importance of fish markets, a hare and goose alluding to the meat markets that symbolised Lincoln's growing commercial importance, and the Star of David reflecting its strong Jewish history. All of this point to the fascinating stories of Lincoln's past.

However the streets themselves are also historic clues as to how this area developed.

After the Romans left, urban life in Lincoln declined. Just a few people lived in the ruins of the Roman town but so little is left as their wooden architecture has not survived the centuries. However, when Danish settlers took over eastern England in the 9th century, Lincoln again became important.

At this time Danelaw divided the country roughly north east to south west and is reflected in place names and dialect which still exist today. Following The Strait up slightly, and opposite Jews House, you can catch a glimpse of a street name that reflects this era of the town's story. Danes Terrace goes off to the right, leading to Danes Gate, a development of the city that goes as far back as the 11th Century.

But you can't fail to notice what lays before you - one of Lincoln's most famous street features - the mighty Steep Hill! If you are ready to scale it, then move on to the next stop to explore why it is there and what influence it still has today...

Directions

Carry on up onto Steep Hill. Continue up and stop outside the Norman House, on your right.

05 The Norman House

Stopping to take a breath half way up the winding and relentless contours of Steep Hill, we find ourselves outside the Norman House. Now a tea shop it is well placed to play to the British need for a leafy refresher on the near vertical climb! However it is the hill and the building itself we are here to explore.

To do that, we need to take ourselves back to Roman rule again, when rebellion from ancient British tribes was anticipated. Lincoln was on the borderland of two such tribes and its hilltop position allowed the Romans to keep a close eye on them and strengthen their control of eastern England.

So it was the defensive possibilities of the hill we are perched on now leading to highest point where they built their fortress that really captured their imagination. And classically, the Romans built their road straight up to it, rather than sparing your feet and legs by traversing the hillside instead. Steep Hill lies along the ancient road of Ermine Street, linking London to York. Back in the Roman era this would have been made of a series of monumental steps and ramps, making it quite a rickety venture!

But what about the Norman House we are outside? Why is this building found half way up a hill so significant to Lincoln's layout?

As its name suggests, this house was built in the Norman era, and dates back to 1170. Although Britain has plenty of churches and castles from this period, domestic dwellings are rare, making this a remarkable survivor. But it also signifies the influential divide between the hill and the plains. The Normans were adept at building with stone, but often kept this for the upper classes of society.

Norman House therefore symbolises the gateway to the fancier neck of the woods – closer to the cathedral and the castle and looking down over the Brayside Pool and the origins of the city. The wealthier military and religious elite would have occupied the church and castle at the top of the hill for its defensive position, whilst the poorer residents occupied the marshier areas close to the river's trade route at its base.

Other cities have divides, often as the industrialisation of urban valleys areas encouraged wealthier residents up out to hillier and cleaner climes – but Lincoln's divide is uniquely ancient and remains prevalent to this day.

Did you notice the Tardis like shift from high street chain stores and modern bars to cobbled streets, boutiques and deli's as you walked through The Strait's archway and made your way up hill?

Voted 'Britain's best place' by the Academy of Urbanism in 2011, Steep Hill is a now thriving tourist area, with Norman House adding to its charm. To this day Lincoln estate agents are keen to point out that a house has an 'uphill' location! The Roman and Norman conquests have certainly left their mark on the modern divide of the city that we can still experience today.

Directions

Continue up the hill and stop in the square between the Castle and the Cathedral.

06 Castle and Cathedral

At the highest point of our exploration of Lincoln's history and cityscape, we reach the pinnacle of both defence and religion. Planted directly opposite each other here you can see the dramatic triple towers of the cathedral and the mighty outer bailey of the castle. Quite the view!

Looking to your left the defensive walls and sturdy demeanour of the castle illustrate the great power of the Normans and their determination to dominate their newly conquered kingdom.

Turning back to your right, you can now appreciate the majesty of the cathedral towering above you. The Normans not only built defences, they also strengthened the control of the church. The first cathedral was comparatively small, and suffered serious damage as a result of an earthquake in 1185, which left it in ruins. We therefore have natural forces to thank for what we see today.

An almost complete rebuild meant that the cathedral was completed much later by which time builders had fully mastered the opulence of gothic architecture. The tallest building in the world until 1549 it was described by Victorian writer John Ruskin as "out and out the most precious piece of architecture in the British Isles and roughly speaking worth any two other cathedrals we have".

From watery beginnings on the Lincolnshire plains to towering architecture and ancient roads this city's tale has been told through how its past links to its present. We have traced the route of how a commercial hub of modernity leads up to heights of wealth and boutique living in just a few short, but very steep miles. An incredible testament to the innovation and design of the Romans and all those who succeeded them, Lincoln's ancient past still serves to create a city divided by landscape and culture today – truly a story of a city of two halves.

Directions

Simply follow the route back to the starting point to find your return transport.

 Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!



Thank you to...

Martin Haslett for creating and photographing the trail

Jo Kemp for suggestions and advice