

THE HOUSES OF CATHEDRAL CLOSE

The Institution stands at the centre of an important group of historic houses. The buildings on this side of Cathedral Green are the finest group of medieval town houses in Devon and Cornwall.

Some survive as spectacular medieval spaces; others have been refronted and have undergone other changes but retain ancient features within. Much more historic fabric is left than is apparent upon casual inspection; some of the best features are hidden away in roof-spaces.

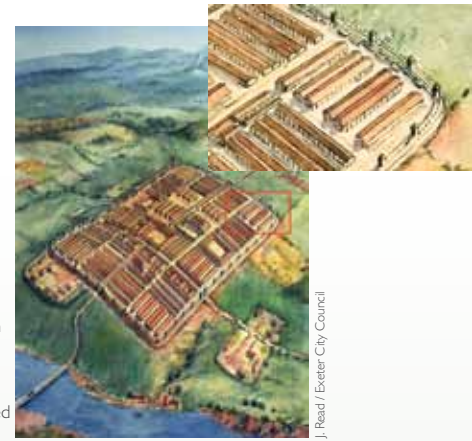
This panel explains the architectural and archaeological significance of these properties.



BACKGROUND

The buried Roman remains

A length of the defences of Exeter's legionary fortress (c. AD 50-75) lies under the rear gardens of these properties; part of the massive defensive ditch was encountered in the Princesshay redevelopment in 2006. Small portions of later Roman town houses have been glimpsed below the part of Cathedral Green near the Institution.

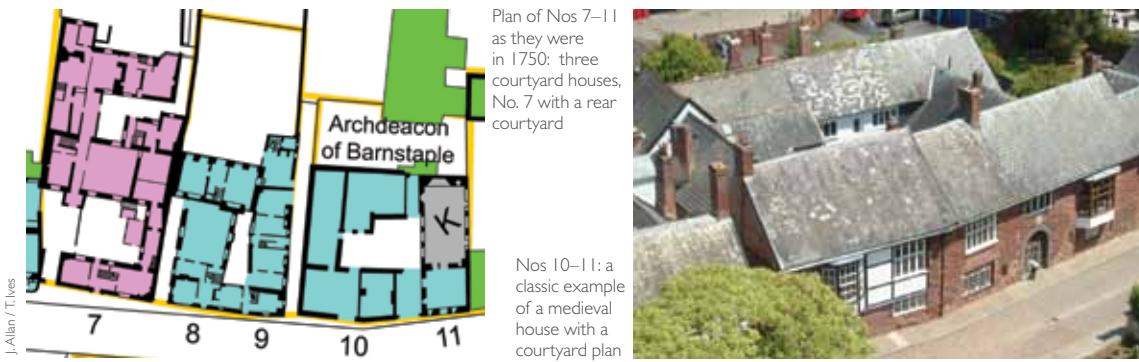
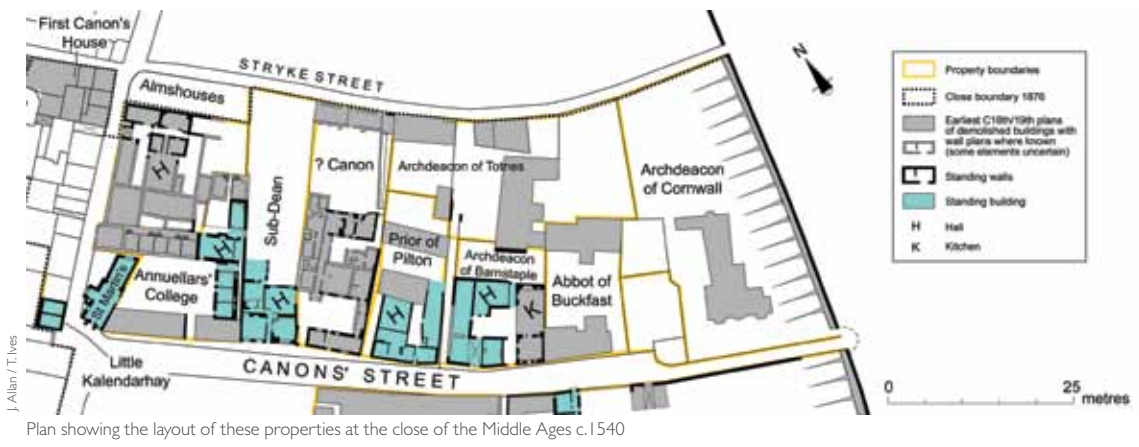


The Saxon and Norman periods

The road outside the Institution (now with 19th-century cobbles) is believed to be part of the late Saxon street system, first laid out in the time of King Alfred (AD 877-99). Beside it, several large rectangular plots of ground were marked out, some of them owned by wealthy townspeople. By the early 13th century, the church had acquired all of these plots.

THE MEDIEVAL BUILDINGS

In the Middle Ages most of these properties were occupied by leading clergy: cathedral canons, archdeacons who administered the diocese, and abbots of Devon monastic houses. They were wealthy men of high status who maintained large households and were expected to entertain. Thus their houses had ample kitchens and fine halls. A typical feature is the courtyard plan (sometimes elaborated to a double courtyard), usually with a large carriageway which allowed the passage of wheeled traffic into the property.



CHANGES AFTER THE REFORMATION

At the Reformation Henry VIII obliged the clergy to surrender some of these properties, which were sold on to secular owners. Others attracted wealthy new secular occupiers like the Courtenays, or were subdivided into smaller town houses. Nos 1-5, for example, were carved out of the single property of the former Annuellars' College. Throughout the post-medieval period Cathedral Close remained a fashionable address, and most of these houses display good examples of Tudor and later work.



THE 20TH CENTURY

The Exeter Blitz and its Aftermath

After a long period without substantial change, parts of the Close suffered serious damage in the Exeter Blitz of 1942; one major historic house (Abbot's Lodge) was destroyed and others were badly damaged. In the aftermath, the long rear gardens of these properties were truncated, becoming part of the new Princesshay shopping centre (built in the early 1950s, rebuilt 2006-7).



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