

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.



View from the north tower of the cathedral, c. 1900. The front of the Institution (foreground, to the right) still retains its Georgian render. Behind is Bedford Circus; the building at its centre is the Bedford Chapel.



A spectacular medieval space: the hammer-beam roof of the Law Library, No. 8. Complex development: an archaeological drawing of the side wall of No. 9 in Choristers Lane, showing the patchwork of different dates and materials typical of these ancient 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.



Plan showing the layout of these properties at the close of the Middle Ages c.1540

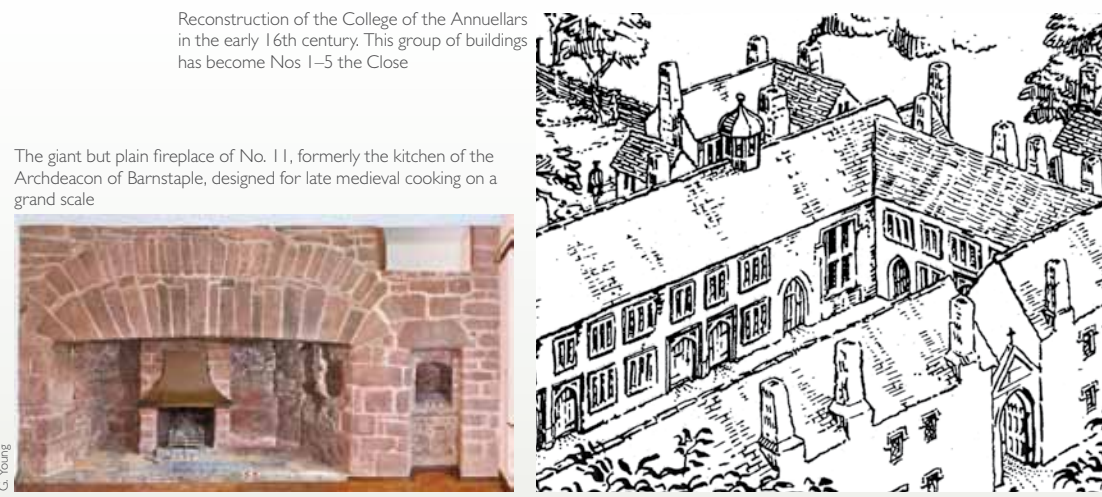


Plan of Nos 7-11 as they were in 1750: three courtyard houses. No. 7 with a rear courtyard. Nos 10-11: a classic example of a medieval house with a courtyard plan.



Detail of the Law Library roof, No. 8. The Close (left). This magnificent roof was built about 1420. Its design is very clearly derived from the greatest hall roof of medieval England that over the great hall of the Palace of Westminster, constructed in 1395–9 (right).

On the site of Nos 1-5, a College of the Annuellars was set up in 1529. Comparable to a small college at Oxford or Cambridge, it had a common hall and lodgings arranged around a courtyard. One side of the college has survived, forming part of ASK.



Reconstruction of the College of the Annuellars in the early 16th century. This group of buildings has become Nos 1-5 the Close. The giant but plain fireplace of No. 11, formerly the kitchen of the Archdeacon of Barnstaple, designed for late medieval cooking on a grand scale.

CHANGES AFTER THE REFORMATION

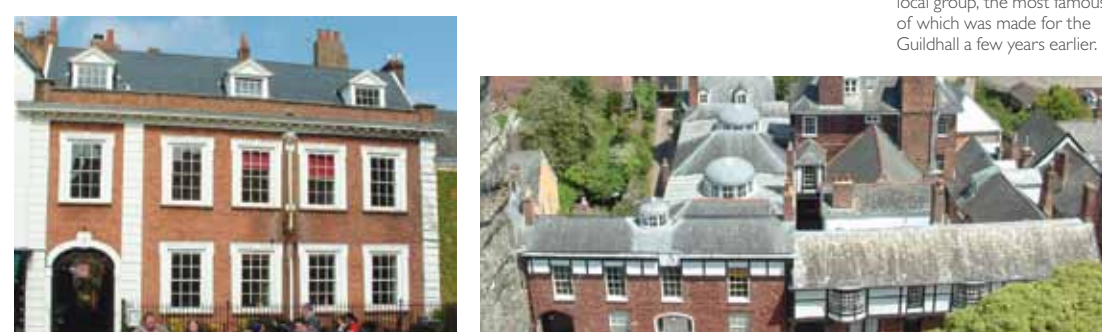
At the Reformation Henry VIII obliged the clergy to surrender some of these properties, which were sold on to secular owners. Others attracted wealthy new secular occupiers like the Courtenays, or were subdivided into smaller town houses. Nos 1–5, for example, were carved out of the single property of 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.



Plan of the Close c. 1750, when clergy lived alongside secular owners. The buildings shown in green, recorded on early maps, have been demolished since 1800.



Archaeological records of the Notaries' House, built c. 1700. It is one of the best-preserved town houses of its period in the region.



Georgian modernisation: the front range of No. 5 (now ASK), built c. 1729. Nos 7-9: two medieval properties showing extensive remodelling. No. 7, transformed after 1813 to the library of the Devon & Exeter Institution. No. 8 remodelled after a serious fire in the 1690s, the rear being rebuilt as the fine new Notaries' House.

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).



The Close and Bedford Circus 1930s. The destruction of the east end of the Close 1942. The Close and Princesshay 2015.

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