

A Day Out in Wells

The day was perfect as was this fascinating Medieval City

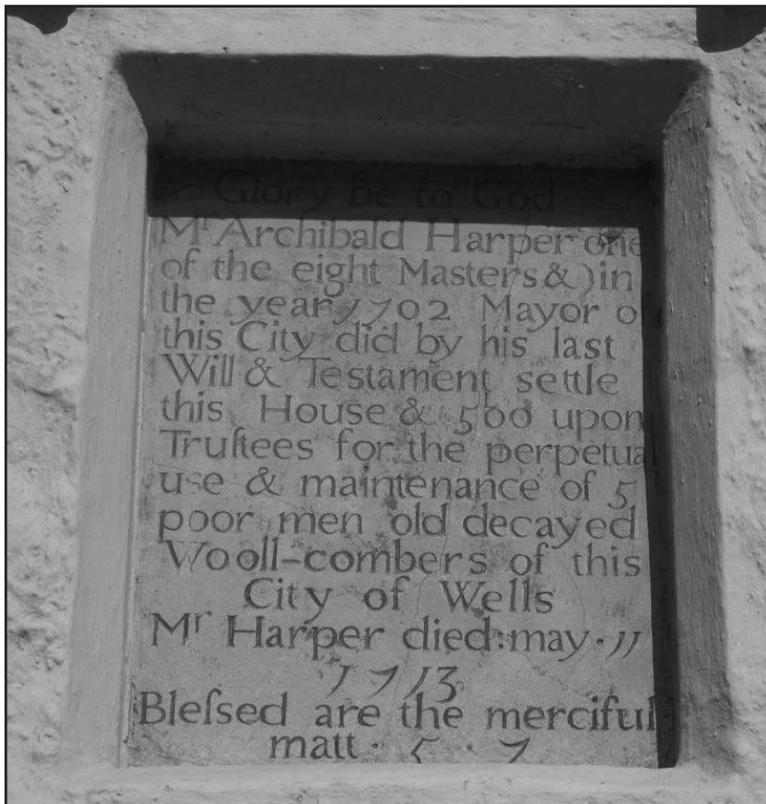
Jackie Thompson

Two members of Wells Civic society took us round the City in the morning. Wells is busy on Saturdays, people being attracted to the excellent market, so we split into two groups to create less congestion. Both parties covered the same ground but ours started in front of the Medieval Cathedral to take in the full majesty of the West Front. I remember the scaffolding covering of the building when the stone was being cleaned about 20 years ago, so it was interesting to learn that all the figures had originally been brightly painted and that flecks of paint have been found in places. We also discovered that there is a special gallery inside the building where choristers can sing to people gathered outside on special occasions, such as processions across the green at Easter time or Palm Sunday, the sound being channeled through hidden holes in the stonework.

We moved on to another gem across St Andrews Street, Vicars Close. This is a cul de sac of delightful Gothic cottages designed originally for the Vicars Choral of the Cathedral and completed by 1363. It is claimed to be the oldest purely residential street in Europe. Originally comprising 44 dwellings, the advent of priests being able to marry necessitated larger accommodation, so properties were merged. The width of the road tapers by 10ft in a length of 460ft to make it look longer. Pugin used the proportions for his Gothic designs in the 19th Century.

Leaving the environs of the Cathedral we crossed Sadler Street where there is evidence of burgage plots - the frontages of four adjacent properties each measure 3 perches, the usual width of the plot of land attached to the rear of dwellings in medieval times to add to the functionality of the whole property. We then walked along Chamberlain Street, passing properties of varying ages until we saw the house that Archibald Harper, an 18th Century mayor, gave in trust on his death for perpetual use, along with £500, to provide for the maintenance of five poor old decayed woolcombers of Wells (See inscription in Figure 1) There are three other groups of almshouses in Chamberlain Street and in Priest Row opposite St Cuthbert's Church, clearly a caring society in the 17th Century.

Also near St Cuthbert's is a house with an inscription on the wall showing that Richard Nicholls mason and Sarah Nicholls dealer in tea, coffee, tobacco, pepper and snuff had lived there. The



houses in Priests Row adjacent to St Cuthbert's Church were all built in the mid 14th century but have been modified over the years though many have the original roof timbers. Obviously the plaque attesting to the residents at one time being a mason and a tobacconist must have been a later addition but the actual date of its insertion is not known.

At the end of Priest Row is the old vicarage of St Cuthbert's and turning left towards the High Street we passed the Old Gaol of 1611 which is now incorporated into the City Arms. The High Street climbs towards the Market Place with culverts along each side of the road taking water from the springs that emerge behind the Cathedral. The High Street had been the Shambles and the fast flowing water could have washed away the detritus of butchery.

Figure 1
Inscription on the Almshouses in Chamberlain Street.

The next area we visited was to the south of the High Street and hiding away on Silver Street is a working farm, just on the edge of town. Silver Street has nothing to do with precious metal but probably relates to trees, as in sylvan.

Further along, before reaching the moat around the Bishop's Palace, is an area of parkland and a tithe barn. Both are in trust from Victorian times and the Tithe barn is a listed building. This is posing a tricky problem for the City fathers, as development is not possible under the terms of the trust, and the splendid Tithe Barn which could be used for community events has no water, electricity or lighting and the expense involved in trying to make the place useable is prohibitive. At the end of the road is pleasant house with an inscription over the door informing us that the cottage was built with money presented to the Bishop, along with an Episcopal ring by the clergy of the diocese to celebrate his 80th birthday in August 1888.

We then reached the moat around the Bishop's Palace, which is also fed from the springs rising on Cathedral land. The moat used to act as a reservoir to power grist mills until they closed down after falling into disuse, likely during the 19th century with the advent of the industrial revolution and steam power. The sluice is still used however to divert water when the level rises too high.

By this time, lunch was calling and the market stalls were able to provide suitable sustenance for some. Others sat by the moat and enjoyed their own picnic in the sunshine. In the afternoon there was again a division of the party. One group toured the Cathedral with a guide at ground level whilst the other climbed to the roof through mysterious passages and saw the gallery where the choristers can sing to an outside gathering. We also observed the ring that is lowered down into the nave during Advent to hold candles and the workings of the famous clock which were replaced in the late 19th Century. Additionally, we saw the drawing floor where the masons produced their plans on a level surface formed from liquid gypsum; there is a similar one at the Minster in York.

On the roof we were treated to magnificent views over the city and surrounding countryside and were able to see the misalignment of the present building with the High Street. This contrasted with the original Saxon Church that was in line with it.

We had a thoroughly enjoyable time with barely enough time to enjoy all the City has to offer. St Cuthbert's is worth a visit, so are the charming Wells museum and the Bishop's Palace. I would be prepared to arrange another High Parts tour if enough people were interested.



Figure 2
BACAS members
gather outside
Wells Cathedral
for the walk.