



1735 City of Wells Plan by William Simes

This is the earliest known plan of the city, which had changed little since medieval times, and still preserves the almost unchanged shape of a medieval city. Even to the present day, the street plan and many of the street names and buildings survive nearly unaltered. The two notable additions are those of Priory Road and Princes Road in the nineteenth century.

The plan is a bird's-eye view of the city from the south and is of a fairly small scale, but full of fascinating detail. The buildings are shown in an elevated view as from above. It has not been possible to find out who William Simes was, but the engraver was William Henry Toms (c. 1700–1765), a Londoner and a leading engraver of the time. He worked on portraits, book-plates, and topographical and architectural subjects.

Simes' Plan shows several buildings and structures which have since disappeared: the shambles (or Middle Row) in the wide part of High Street, an imposing Tudor market cross, and a 17th century Market Hall in the middle of the Market Place. There is a canonical house on the site of the present Town Hall. What is now the Cathedral Green was then still a churchyard. You can see a public conduit called Jacob's Well, a horse pond just to the right of the Bishop's Eye gate, and a lime kiln on Tor Hill.

The plan is enlivened by detailed depictions of people, animals, carts, swans on the moat, fishermen fishing in the moat. A bath house in modern South Street and the gaol built in 1606 are marked; both of these still stand. Butt Close on the north-west edge of the city was probably used for archery practice. The way to Glastonbury was then via Queen Street, modern St John Street, and Southover.

However, captivating though the plan is, we should not take it too literally. It is a stylised representation, not based on an accurate survey, and is not completely reliable. For

instance, although the main buildings can be recognised, the drawings are not necessarily precise portrayals: Simes omitted the Great Hall at The Bishop's Palace and the west wing of the large mansion on Chamberlain Street (which is depicted clearly in Samuel and Nathaniel Buck's 'Prospect of the City of Wells from the North' of the next year). Also, the geographical layout has been altered. For example, the portrayal of The Bishop's Palace is distorted, and the perspective is skewed. The shape of the moat has been regularised almost to a rectangle. Simes also mis-identified St Andrew's Well, and omitted the actual St Andrew's Well.

Furthermore, the picturesque representation of houses' gardens and orchards is formulaic, depicting an unlikely degree of orderliness. Moreover, we know that there were buildings where Simes drew gardens: archaeological excavations near Wells Museum showed that there are structural remains within areas shown by him as garden. Conversely, where Simes showed a building on a site in Southover, archaeological work has shown that this plot remained undeveloped.

Allowing for a certain degree of artistic licence, the Simes map remains a fascinating and compelling snapshot of Wells in the early 18th century. Only five originals of the map are known to survive, and one of these is in Wells & Mendip Museum.

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