

Snapshots in Time: Mapping Wells

THE HAMILTON MANSION

Simes' Plan of 1735 (figure 1) shows a substantial property, with gardens behind and to the west of it, sandwiched between Sadler Street and Union Street and bordering the south side of Chamberlain Street. A house on this site has often been the residence of people of note in the town. Today, it comprises No. 11 Chamberlain Street, East House and Carmelite House. Little is believed to remain of the original Hamilton Mansion as much of the existing building dates from c1820.¹

What is the Story of this Mansion?

It is known that properties fronted Chamberlain Street in medieval times in the area now covered by the Roman Catholic Church and the site of the mansion shown in the Simes' Plan. Evidence suggests that a sizeable property was probably in existence then and possibly lived in by Peter Le Monier and his family during the 1300s and that *"there is a tradition that it was occupied subsequently by Thomas Tanner 'but that evidence for this is 'circumstantial'".*²

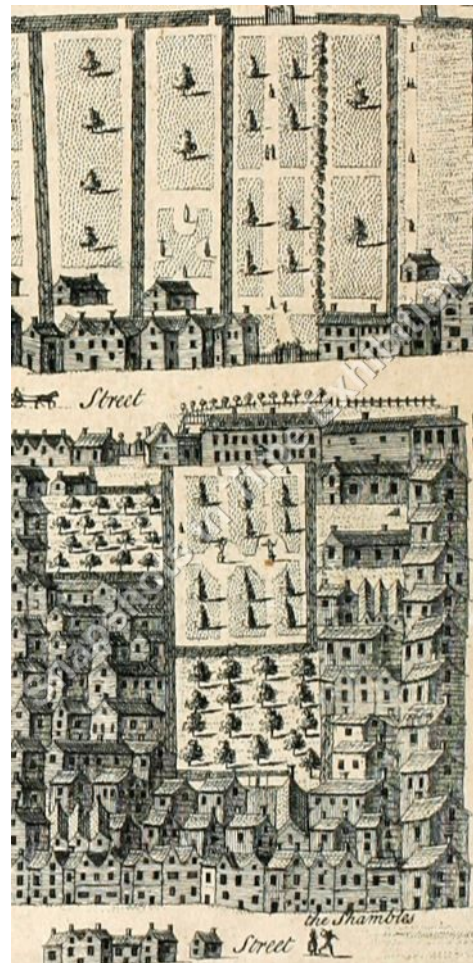


Figure 1 W. Simes, A Plan of the City of Wells, 1735. Reproduced with kind permission of Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (ref: DD\SAS/C795/PR/504).

¹ <http://www.somersetheritage.org.uk/record/27004>, accessed 14/02/2017

² R.D Reid and T Scrase, *A Great House and Two Lanes in Wells*, Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, Vol 125, 1981, p33

Peter Le Monier may have been the first of many notable residents of a house on this site. Peter Le Monier was a wealthy burgess of the town, connected to the Court and a merchant in cloth and wool. Peter Le Monier also owned several properties in the city.³

Thomas Tanner (d. 1401) was another affluent burgess in the town, his wealth arising from his property portfolio, within and beyond the city, his rural estate and trading activities. He held the most important office within the city, the Mastership, for as many as six annual terms and was also Member of Parliament (1384, 1390 and 1399).

The next evidence of a house on this site is a survey in 1649 of Vicars Choral' lands which was undertaken for the Commonwealth Parliament. This gives "*the first definite reference to the house occupying the bulk of modern No 11 and is described as the messuage in the tenure of Thomas Coward, gentleman. A subsequent lease of 1717 has 'the mansion late of William Coward, sergeant-at-law'*".⁴

The Cowards had some status in the town: the historian Tony Scrase notes that a John Coward (d. 1591) married an heiress but '*preferred to live at No 11 Chamberlain Street*'⁵. John held the position of High Constable of the city. His grandson, William, '*referred to as Sergeant William Coward*'⁶ was Recorder of Wells⁷ and a Tory MP⁸. His son, Colonel William Coward (1666-1714), served as an MP for Wells 1708-1710, and 1714 and, like his father, as a Sergeant at Law.⁹

The Honourable George Hamilton

The house next came into the ownership of the Hon. George Hamilton, second son of the Earl of Abercorn, who married Bridget, the daughter of Colonel William Coward. The Hon. George Hamilton was MP for Wells, 1747-5; he had "*tried before (to become an MP) but*

³ T. Scrase: *A French Merchant in Fourteenth Century Wells*, Somerset Archaeology and Natural History, 1989

⁴ Reid and Scrase, *A Great House and Two Lanes in Wells*, p35

⁵ Ibid, p35

⁶ Ibid, p37

⁷ Definition of Recorder: a Recorder was a magistrate or judge having criminal and civil jurisdiction within the corporation of a city or borough

⁸ <http://www.historyofparliamentonline.org/volume/1660-1690/member/coward-william-1634-1705> (accessed 15/02/2017)

⁹ "*In English Legal History, an elite order of attorneys who had the exclusive privilege of arguing before the Court of Common Pleas and also supplied the judges for both Common Pleas and the Court of the King's Bench.*" (Source: <http://legal-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/Sergeant+at+law> - accessed 15/02/2017)

had been unseated for malpractices, not an unusual event in those days”.¹⁰ He was also the first chairman of the Wells Turnpike Trust, formed in 1753.

The Hon. George Hamilton embarked on a programme of improvement to the house: he expanded the curtilage by the acquisition of other properties, surrounded it on three sides with high crenelated walls, demolished two cottages in Union Street to convert to stables and rebuilt the house.¹¹

In mortgages and leases between 1730 and 1750, the property is described as “*that Mansion or dwellinghouse in Chamberlain Street with all house buildings, stables, courts, etc. and several gardens belonging with the same*”.¹²

The Simes’ Plan and a panorama of the North West Prospect of the City of Wells, 1736, created by the Buck brothers (figure 2) give us some visual clues to the shape and size of the mansion. Both show a building of considerable size in contrast to most other properties in the town; its prestige is clear! The Buck image shows a

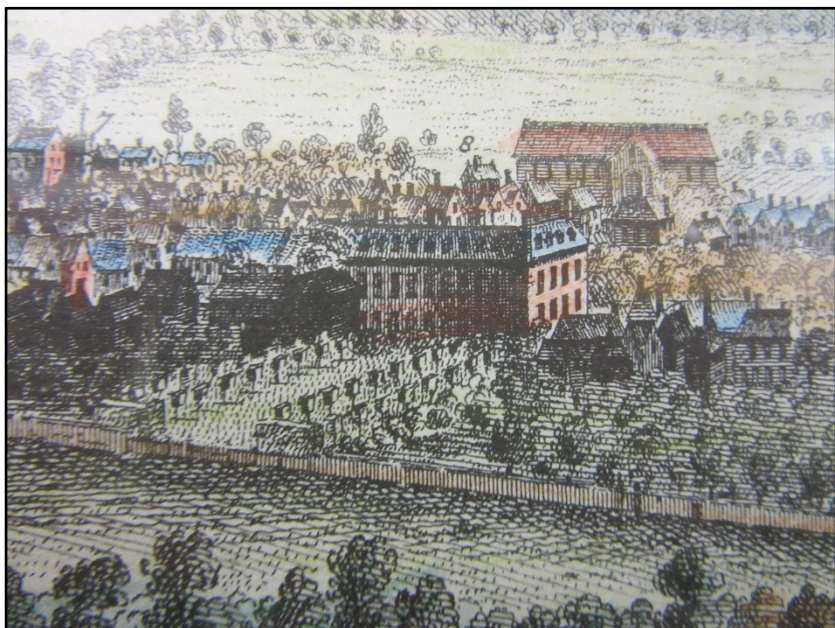


Figure 2 Enlargement of Hand-coloured Panorama by the Buck brothers, 1736 from a 20th century reproduction. With kind permission of Wells & Mendip Museum.

substantial wing which is not included in the Simes’ Plan. This may be down to the known inaccuracies of Simes’ Plan which also suggests the presence of an orchard beyond the end of the garden, when in fact it bordered the outhouses and yards of the houses on High Street.¹³

However, both Simes and the Buck brothers agree on the garden which lies opposite the mansion on the north side of Chamberlain Street. This garden was created by George who acquired three properties fronting the north side of Chamberlain street, together

¹⁰ Reid and Scrase, *A Great House and Two Lanes in Wells*, Proceedings of the Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society, Vol 125, 1981, p37

¹¹ T. Scrase, *Wells: A Small City* (Tempus Publishing, Stroud, 2006) p108

¹² Reid and Scrase, *A Great House and Two Lanes in Wells*, p39

¹³ Ibid

with their gardens; he demolished the houses to create a 'vista' to his manor on Milton Hill. As Reid and Scrase noted, Hamilton was following a well-known landscaping trend of the time: demolishing property if it stood in the way of a landscaping scheme.¹⁴ This garden became known as the 'Vista'.

George Hamilton was the brother of the Hon. Charles Hamilton who designed and created the famous landscape park gardens at Painshill Park, Surrey. Charles eventually sold Painshill Park due to financial difficulties. An interest in grand landscaping schemes clearly ran in the family!

As a footnote to George Hamilton, he was grandfather to William Beckford of Fonthill Abbey. In 1784, William was accused of having conducted homosexual acts (a capital offence at the time) in his early twenties. Whilst this was unproven, it nonetheless created an immense scandal forcing the young Beckford to flee abroad. He remained a social outcast for the rest of his life. However, he decided to return to England and with the architect James Wyatt created a home on the Fonthill estate in the style of a gothic cathedral. Beckford wrote his well-known gothic novel, *Vathek*, at the age of 21. He was also a great collector and his collection included: paintings, books, statues, ceramics and furniture. He was immensely wealthy, his wealth deriving from property and the revenues from sugar plantations in Jamaica. His extravagance and declining sugar prices led to the eventual sale of Fonthill Abbey. Sadly, due to the poor workmanship and shoddy materials used in the building of the Abbey, only a tiny part of the building survives today as much of the building was destroyed following the collapse of the 90-metre tower in 1825.

Following in the family tradition, Hamilton eventually overstretched himself and was forced to sell up.

Subsequent Owners

From Hamilton, the mansion passed into the ownership of Zachery Bayly. Zachery had been a partner in the failed Bath City Bank, its bankruptcy leading to his financial ruin and the sale of his assets.

The house then found its way into the hands of Robert Tudway who lived in the mansion in the 1790s. The Tudways were a family who had built up considerable influence and power in the city over the years. Their wealth derived from ownership of sugar plantations

¹⁴ Ibid

in Antigua. Robert's brother was Clement Tudway who was MP for Wells from 1760 to his death in 1815. Scrase quotes the following text from the *Universal British Directory of 1783-9*: "The influence prevailing in this city is that of Clement Tudway, Esq., one of the present representatives. This gentleman has a sufficient interest always to procure a return for himself without expense and the Corporation, etc., compliment some friend or neighbour with the other seat". He goes on to say: "Wells had become a classical pocket borough".¹⁵ ¹⁶Both Clement and Robert served regularly as Mayor of Wells, the former eleven times (Clement: 1763-64, 1772-73, 1775-76, 1780-81, 1784-85, 1787-88, 1791-92, 1794-95, 1797-98, 1803-04, 1808-09; Robert: 1765-66, 1771-72, 1777-78).¹⁷

The mansion continued to change hands. In c. 1812, the property was held by the Revd. Dr. Eyre and it then passed into the hands of his widow, Ann Eyre. In the 1820s, it belonged to Edmund Broderip, who sold it to John Lee of Dillington House and Estate in Devon. In 1840 Lee sold to William Goodenough Haytor, a barrister, Whig politician and MP for Wells (1837–1878) who was created a Baronet in 1858. In 1865, he passed the mansion to his son Lieutenant Arthur Devitt Haytor who sold it to John Webber in 1869, who sold it to the Roman Catholic Church in 1874 (see below for more information on this).

Not all the owners lived in the house and some rented/leased it to others. Reid and Scrase note that Edmund Broderip never seems to have lived there, and that Haytor's use of the house was infrequent, although he was an MP for Wells, was "at best patchy".¹⁸

In the 1871 England Census, we know that Bishop Eden's widow was living in the house along with two daughters, a son, a niece and the following servants: butler, footman, housekeeper, cook, ladies' maid, housemaid and kitchen maid. It has been suggested that Bishop Eden also lived there at one time, preferring it to the damp quarters in the Bishop's Palace.

¹⁵ Scrase, *Wells: A Small City*, p118

¹⁶ "Pocket borough, election district that is controlled by, or "in the pocket" of, one person or family. The term was used by 19th-century English parliamentary reformers to describe the many boroughs in which a relatively small population was either bribed or coerced by the leading family or landowners to elect their representatives to Parliament. As a result, Parliament was controlled by the landed gentry and seats were filled by representatives who wanted to please their patrons rather than their constituents. Reforms passed in 1832 and 1867 ended this practice by widening the franchise and redistributing parliamentary seats to reflect the population shift from rural areas to the industrial towns."

(<https://www.britannica.com/topic/pocket-borough>, accessed 2 May 2017)

¹⁷ *Roll of Mayors*, Wells City Archives (WCC/3390/2)

¹⁸ Reid and Scrase, *A Great House and Two Lanes in Wells*, p41

It is clear from the descriptions of the many people who lived in the house over the years, that they were people of substantial standing in the community. Chamberlain Street had become over the years a fashionable area of town and attracted many of ‘the Great and the Good’.

The Story of the Convent

Following the death of Bishop Eden’s widow, the mansion came up for sale and news of this reached the Roman Catholic Bishop of Clifton, Bishop Clifford. He was seeking suitable premises for a Carmelite order based in Plymouth who were unhappy with the proximity of their convent to a public house and its lack of privacy, which was having a detrimental impact on their contemplative life. He was also aware that the growing

Catholic community in Wells, in the second half of the 19th century, were seeking a permanent place of worship. The mansion seemed to fit the bill. Bishop Clifford wrote to the Prioress: *“It seems to me that Providence has put in our way the very thing you require. The late Bishop of Bath and Wells [The Rt. Hon. The Lord Auckland] did not like to reside in the episcopal palace at Wells because he considered it was damp, so he took a house in the town which has a large garden attached to it. When he died, his widow continued to reside there, and she having*

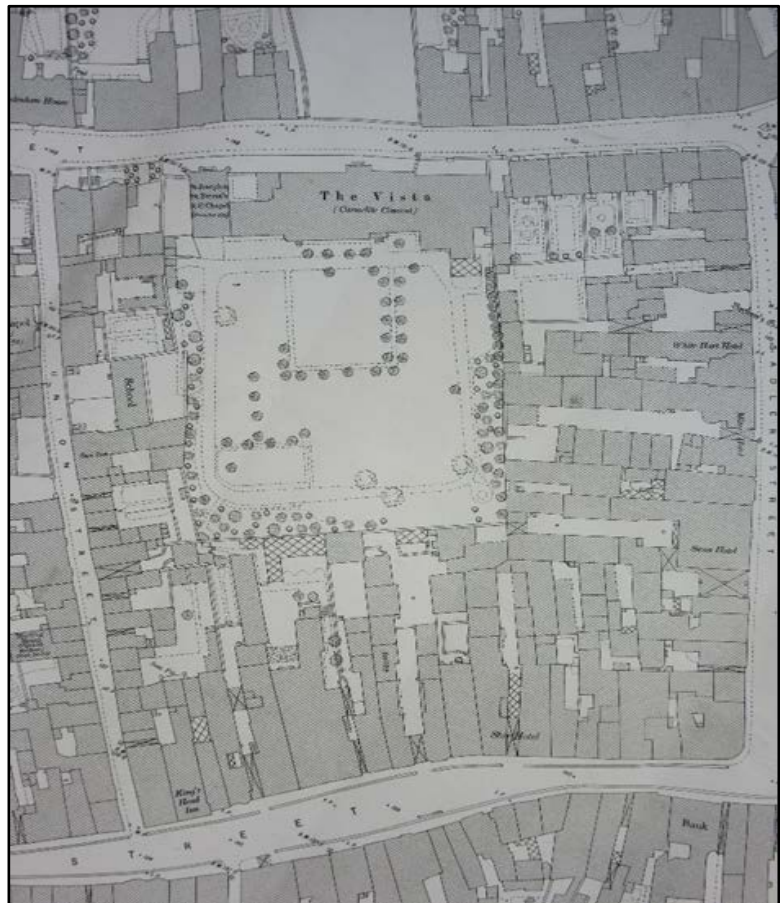


Figure 3 Extract from Ordnance Survey 1:500 Town Plan Wells, 1886 showing the site of the convent and size of gardens. Reproduced with kind permission of South West Heritage Trust. Digital copy held at Somerset Heritage Centre

*died recently the place is for sale... It has quite the look of a convent”.*¹⁹ In secrecy, the purchase went ahead and the nuns took possession of the mansion, which was by this

¹⁹ <http://demo.cliftondiocese.com/parishes/ss-joseph-teresa/parish/parish-history/>. Accessed 12 Feb 2017

time known as 'The Vista', on 13th July 1875. Apparently "*negotiations had to be carried out by a third party since 'there would be no chance of getting it, if it were known to be wanted by Catholics'. There was some uproar when news broke out that the Catholics had acquired it, but the deed literally had been done*".²⁰ "*When it became known in the old City of Wells that the Vista had been secured for Catholic nuns, there was a fearful commotion and several persons exerted themselves to get the contract annulled, but it was too late.*"²¹ This response was because of widespread concern at the time of a return to the use of Roman Catholic practices within Church of England services, which had resulted in the 1874 Public Worship Act banning, amongst other things, the wearing of the chasuble. However, the arrival of the Carmelite nuns was a cause of celebration and joy for the growing number of Catholics in Wells and on the 16th July 1875, for the first time since the Reformation, a public Papal Mass was held in the city.

With the contribution of a significant sum of money and funds from the Carmelite community, a chapel was built in the convent grounds for the use of the nuns and local Catholics and later extended. This original chapel is now the nave of the current Catholic church.

The nuns also founded a school in premises they donated within the grounds of the property. This was the forerunner of today's St Joseph and St Teresa Catholic Primary School in the city.

After almost 100 years, the story of the mansion was to change again. The nuns left Wells in 1972 to join a Carmelite convent in Darlington; yet again, the outside world was intruding on their contemplative way of life. Convents were also joining forces out of necessity to make economies. The thriving Catholic community was delighted with the donation to the parish, by the Carmelite order, of the church buildings, the Choir and Sacristies; the rest of the building was converted and sold off as residential properties

As an interesting footnote to the house, the general area in which it is sited was also 'home' to two lanes that have long since disappeared: Moniers, Moners or Manners Lane and Swan Lane. The Moniers name came about probably because of the ownership of properties on that lane by Peter Le Monier. It is believed that Swan Lane ran along the

²⁰ <http://demo.cliftondiocese.com/parishes/ss-joseph-teresa/parish/parish-history/>

²¹ *Church of St Joseph & Teresa, Wells, Somerset*, Wells & Mendip Museum Library, Wells/box 6

eastern boundary of the Mansion and to the rear of the houses on the West side of Sadler Street and ended at the Swan Inn.²²

If you would like further information on the history of Wells and its buildings, you are welcome to contact or visit Wells City Archives (archives@wellsmuseum.org.uk) and Wells & Mendip Museum (admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk).

²² Reid and Scrase, A Great House and Two Lanes in Wells, p39