

# Snapshots in Time: Mapping Wells

## THE HIGH CROSS

Simes' Plan of 1735 (figure 1), at the junction of Sadler Street and High Street, shows a building with a pinnacle which is referred to as the Cross. Crosses were frequently built to mark the site of a market place where historically the right to hold a regular market or fair was granted by the monarch, a bishop or a baron. Fairs have long been a feature of Wells. Bishop Robert (1136-66), in his charter, granted the right for 3 fairs to be held in the town. It stipulated: *"the Bishop requires that the markets and fairs should not be held in the Cathedral Close, but that they should be holden in the*

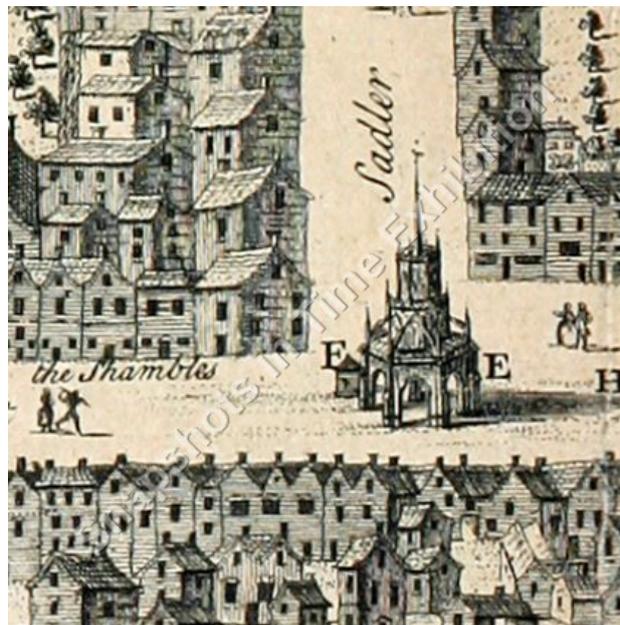


Figure 1 W. Simes, A Plan of the City of Wells, 1735.  
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Archaeological and Natural History Society (ref:  
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*open Streets and places in the Town; and in consideration of the traders obeying the Bishop's injunction, he acquits them of toll".<sup>1</sup> The historian Tony Scrase, notes that these fairs are "amongst the earliest recorded fairs in England".<sup>2</sup> Bishop Savaric granted a fourth fair in 1201 and in the same year King John granted a fifth in his charter. This charter also mentions a weekly market. These fairs were important to the town; held over several days, they brought in visitors and trade.*

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Serel, *A Lecture of the History of Wells*, (Wells, 1858), p 5

<sup>2</sup> Tony Scrase, *Wells A Small City*, (Stroud, Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2006), p 23

## What is the story of this beautiful building?

It is known that a cross stood in the market place in the 1400s and writers refer to this as the 'Old Cross'. The Victorian antiquarian Thomas Serel <sup>3</sup> states that "it certainly stood there in 1451, when Bishop Bekynton built the conduit as it is mentioned in his grant of water to the City". His grant includes the words "*in which the said water may descend...unto the high cross built in the Market of our said city*" However, sometime in the late 1530s, the building of a new cross got underway with money left by Richard Woolman, Dean of Wells and funding from Bishop William Knight. This building has become known as the 'High Cross' or 'Market Cross'.

The cross was still being built when John Leland, a 'travel writer' in the 16<sup>th</sup> century travelled through Wells: "*William Knight, now Bishop of Bath, buildith a crosse in the market place, a right sumptuous peace of worke: in the extreme circumference wherof be vij. faire pillers and in another circumference withyn them be vj. Pillers and yn the midle of this circumference one piller; al these shaul bere a volte, and over the volte shaul be domus civica.*" In a margin he notes that: "*This work was made possible by the legacie of Doctor Wolman Deane of Welles.*" <sup>4</sup> The High Cross had made a strong impression on him as it did on other writers around the same time. William Camden, in the last quarter of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, writing about Wells in his *Britannia, the first chorographical survey of the islands of Great Britain and Ireland*, noted the following: "*in the middest whereof is to be seene a Market-place, supported with seven Columnnes or pillar without, arched overhead right daintily, which William Knight the Bishop, and Wolman the Deane founded for the use of people resorting thither to the Market*".<sup>5</sup> And Francis Godwin, son of Thomas Godwin, Bishop of Bath & Wells (1584-1590), in his *De Præsulibus Angliæ commentarius* (1616) writes: "*In foro urbis Wellensis crucem habemus opere exquisito fabricatam et octodecim columnis suspensam. Quatenus illius author et conditur fuerit hic Antistes, elogium eidem incisum indicabit, cujus haec est sententia:*

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<sup>3</sup> Serel, *A Lecture of the History of Wells*, p 39

<sup>4</sup> Toulmin Smith, L (ed.), *The Itinerary of John Leland in or about the years 1535-1543*. (George Bell & Sons, London, 1907), p.145/6

<sup>5</sup>*Britain, or A chorographical description of the most flourishing kingdomes, England, Scotland, and Ireland, and the ilands adjoining, out of the depth of antiquitie beautified wvith mappes of the severall shires of England: vwritten first in Latine by William Camden Clarenceux K. of A. Translated newly into English by Philémon Holland Doctour in Physick: finally, revised, amended, and enlarged with sundry additions by the said author.*1637. Camden, William, 1551-1623., Holland, Philemon, 1552-1637, p232 (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A17832.0001.001/1:11.1?rgn=div2;view=fulltext> - accessed 27/01/17)

*Ad honorem dei omnipotens et commodum pauperum, mercatum Wellæ frequentantiam, impensis Gulielmi Knight, Episcopi, et Richardi Wooleman hujus Ecclesiæ Cathedralis olim Decani, hic locus erectus est. Laus Deo, pax vivis, requies defunctis. Amen. A.D. 1542*<sup>6</sup>

This translates as: "We have a cross in the market place of the city of Wells made with exquisite skill raised on eighteen columns. To show that Antistes was the designer and builder of this he inscribed this passage/verse on it, and this is what it said:

*.....To the honour of almighty God and the benefit of the poor people visiting the market at Wells this place was erected at the expense of William Knight, Bishop, and Richard Wooleman, former Dean of this Cathedral Church. Praise to God, peace to the living and rest to the dead. Amen. AD. 1542"*

Pooley, writing in his book *Old Stone Crosses of Somerset*<sup>7</sup>, notes that there is some inconsistency in the number of pillars quoted by different writers in their descriptions of the cross but they are all in agreement about its magnificence. An illustration included in his book (Figure 2) drew on the detail in the Simes' Plan of Wells and gives us a clear idea of how this might have looked. He goes on to describe it thus: "It rises from its hexagonal basement to the second, third and fourth stages, and to its tapering spire, with the utmost grace and elegance. The exquisitely mullioned windows of the second story, which is strengthened and supported by the flying buttresses, and surrounded by a pierced parapet and crocketed pinnacles, and above this the third story, keeping the same lines but varying the ornamentation, and surmounted also by its pierced parapet and pinnacles, form together a fitting



Figure 2 Illustration of the High Cross Wells from C. Pooley, *The Old Stone Crosses of Somerset* (Longmans, Green & Co), 1877. Reproduced with kind permission from Wells & Mendip Museum Library

<sup>6</sup> Francis Godwin, *De praesulibus Angliae commentaries*, (London,1616) p 443 ([http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/fs1/object/display/bsb10004605\\_00468.html?contextType=scan&contextSort=score%2Cdescending&contextRows=10&contextStart=0&context=crucem+habemus+opere+exquisito+](http://reader.digitale-sammlungen.de/en/fs1/object/display/bsb10004605_00468.html?contextType=scan&contextSort=score%2Cdescending&contextRows=10&contextStart=0&context=crucem+habemus+opere+exquisito+)) accessed 27/01/2017

<sup>7</sup> C Pooley, *Old Stone Crosses of Somerset*, (Longmans, Green and Co., London, 1877), p97/98

foundation to be crowned by the slender spire. These features, together with the loftiness of the arches, with their buttressed piers, and the central column piercing the whole, combined to render this Cross one of the most harmoniously beautiful in the kingdom.” He also refers to the “perfect and lofty symmetry of the building” and “the purity of its outline”.<sup>8</sup>

The High Cross was meant to make a statement about the importance and prosperity of the town - Scrase writes: “There was a definite hierarchy in medieval crosses. Minor towns had market or high crosses that comprised a stepped base with a simple shaft rising from it. .... More important places had the central shaft surrounded by an arched structure. The grandest crosses (like the High Cross in Wells) surmounted this with a spire-like superstructure. In Somerset, only two other places (other than Wells) aspired to this form.”<sup>9</sup>

Sadly, the High Cross was not to survive. Scrase notes that in 1785 part of the High Cross collapsed. He goes on to say that “It had probably been weakened by the bailiff’s efforts in 1762 to enclose part as a butcher’s stall and by more recent works to pave the extended market. It was removed as ‘ruinous and dangerous’”<sup>10</sup>

Many high crosses or market crosses still exist. The poultry cross which still stands in Salisbury, Wiltshire, gives some idea of how Wells High Cross might have looked. It dates from the late 15<sup>th</sup> century and was one of four crosses in the town; the others were the Cheese Cross, Barnard’s Cross for livestock, and a fourth cross which designated a market for wool and yarn.

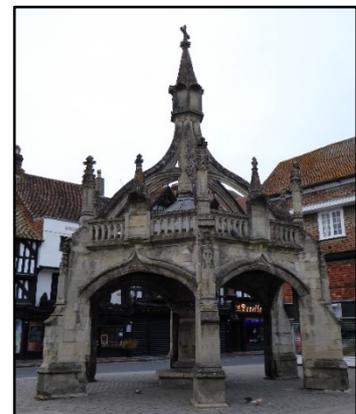


Figure 3 The Poultry Cross, Salisbury, Wiltshire. © 2017 J. Meyrick

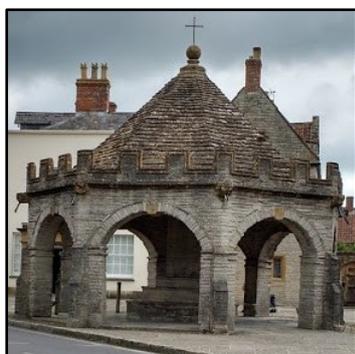


Figure 4 Somerton Buttercross.  
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Another more modest cross can be found in the middle of Somerton. Built in 1673, it’s known as the Buttercross, and is where market traders sold butter, cheese and milk, sheltered from the rain and hot sun.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid p100

<sup>9</sup> Scrase, *Wells A Small City*, p 69

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p 120

Other market crosses can still be seen today across the County of Somerset.

### To what uses was the High Cross put?

Camden called it a 'Market-place' and we know that market stalls were erected within the pillars. It would too have undoubtedly provided very useful shelter on wet days and been a convenient meeting place. It was also the key site in the city from which public announcements and proclamations by the Crown, the bishop's bailiff and Justices of the Peace were read. It was too where the watch met and provided a great vantage place from which to watch processions and ceremonies.

Another role, certainly in the 16th and 17th centuries, was as the location for public penance. As an example, in January 1594, Joan Teight was ordered to stand at the High Cross from 11.00 to 12.00 on Saturday, bare-faced and covered only in a white sheet from her shoulders to her feet. This punishment was followed by further penance in church. Her sin was adultery with the married Thomas Everett, a member of Vicar's Choral and Joan was his maid servant. The story of Joan Teight has been researched and compiled by Tony Scrase. He writes:

*"Penance such as Joan's almost always resulted from sexual indiscretions. The story is incomplete but can be found in The Calendar of the Manuscripts of the Dean & Chapter of Wells Vol. II pp. 327-8, 330 and L S Colchester (ed.) Act Books 1541-1593 of the Vicars Choral of Wells pp. 57-8.*

*It begins on 2nd Oct. 1593 when Thomas Everett described as a former vicar choral was summonsed to appear before the Chapter to answer a charge of committing adultery with his maidservant Joan Teight and making her pregnant. He failed to appear and the matter put off to the 12th when he was again absent and was therefore excommunicated. Joan confessed and was summonsed again for 2nd January for sentence. Then on 14th December Everett and Christina Teight were also summonsed for the 2nd. Christina was presumably kin and accused of covering things up. On the 2nd nobody initially appeared. Joan was excommunicated but arrived in the afternoon and was sentenced next day. Everett was excommunicated again and a warrant issued for his arrest. The record cryptically says that Christina received the same sentence on the 3rd January but whether that was excommunication or penance is unclear.*

Eventually Everett approached the chapter through an agent and on the 20th June submitted, was absolved of his excommunication and dismissed from his office in the cathedral.

Finally, on the 26th November George Huish (one of the bell-ringers) appeared charged with incontinence<sup>11</sup> with Joan based on her confession. He craved to be allowed to make his purgation (swear his innocence) and this was allowed provided four neighbours of credit living in the Liberty of St Andrew supported him. On the 16th December Huish was cleared on the oaths of four compurgators.

So that is certainly a human interest story!

Some further points on the undoubted 'baddie', Thomas Everett.

Firstly, he hadn't been a vicar long. He was admitted on a year's probation in 1590. He was then described as 'clerk' so he was in Holy Orders. He must have been married by 1593 as the offense involving him and Joan is called adultery while the alleged liaison between Joan and Huish is only incontinence. (The adultery explains the severity of Joan's penance).

He seems to have taken himself off as soon as the scandal began to break. The vicars had a sequence of important meetings in September and October in which attendance was listed and he was missing. This must explain why he was cited as 'former vicar choral' in October although he wasn't formally dismissed until the next year.

He could also be the Thomas Everett who was dismissed from the post of sacrist in 1586. He had carelessly left the treasury keys in the clock-house 'a place of common resort' for several days. The treasury was then robbed of the chapter seal, plate and money"<sup>12</sup>

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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](mailto:archives@wellsmuseum.org.uk)) and Wells & Mendip Museum ([admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk](mailto:admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk)).

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<sup>11</sup> Lacking self-restraint/self-control especially of a sexual desire

<sup>12</sup> T. Scrase