

Snapshots in Time: Mapping Wells

SHAMBLES AND MIDDLE ROW

The Shambles are shown on Simes' Plan of 1735 (figure 1) as a row of buildings and a single building in the middle of High Street, sandwiched between the lines of houses on either side. These buildings have also been called 'Middle Row', due to their location in the middle of the street.



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)

Many towns and cities in medieval times had established 'Shambles' and Wells was no different. It was a term used to denote open-air market stalls for goods such as meat and fish and the word 'shambles' is derived from the medieval word 'shammel' meaning wide wooden bench. Other examples are leather shambles and pudding shambles (as existed in medieval St Albans). Meat shambles not only displayed the freshly butchered meat but were usually the site, too, for the slaughtering of animals. *"Also, cattle were baited before slaughter. This was not just a cruel sport but seen as a public health measure (as the animals voided their guts). Butchers could be fined for slaughtering unbaited animals."*¹

¹ T Scrase

Imagine the scene: the cries and shouts of the market traders; the noise from terrified animals brought to be baited, slaughtered and butchered that very day; the smell of fresh meat and blood; dogs, birds such as crows and red kites, and the odd cat feeding off the blood and entrails just thrown into the street; the stench of rotten meat. Unsurprisingly, the appalling lack of hygiene in the meat shambles was a



Figure 2 Annibale Carracci, *The Butcher's Shop*, Early 1580s, Oil on canvas, 59.7 x 71 cm, AP 1980.08. Reproduced with kind permission of the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas

major contributory factor in serious diseases that sprang up in towns and cities.² Householders living either side of the Shambles were probably pleased to hear the bell which was rung to signal the end of the market; peace and quiet would descend until the bell was rung at the start of the next market day.

Wells Shambles

As with other towns, market traders would have set up their benches or shammels on market days and fair days. A lecture given in 1858 notes that a row of stalls or benches known as 'Middle Row' existed in the 1300s.³ The historian Tony Scrase has a sketch of High Street in 1350-1400 showing benches on market days and a cookshop built by Adam de Carleton⁴, on the site of his bench acquired in 1346. (This cookshop was subsequently demolished as it was obstructing the highway.) In his report, *High Street Wells - A study in Continuity and Change*⁵, Scrase notes that some of these stalls. "also known as *selds*, *benches* or *shambles*" had, by 1345, become permanent structures thereby creating Middle Row.

² <http://www.jorvik.co.uk/shambles/>

³ T. Serel, *A Lecture on the History of Wells*, 1858, p36

⁴ Tony Scrase, *Wells A Small City*, (Stroud, Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2006), p 45

⁵ A.J Scrase, *High Street Wells - A Study in Continuity and Change Wells* (Natural History and Archaeological Society Reports 1957-1984, 95th & 96th Annual Reports,) p6

As in other towns and cities, the market was regulated and standards enforced by the shambles wardens, who were appointed by the Town Guild, and bailiffs appointed by the Bishop. Market traders paid rent to the owners of Middle Row: Bubwith's Almshouse, Vicars Choral, the Town Guild, later becoming the Corporation, and the precentor.

In 1572, the Town Guild built and occupied a new town hall above part of the fish shambles in the centre of the High Street.⁶ The new town hall was *"like many such built on columns with two stalls sited underneath. Access was by a double flight of steps at its eastern end...."*⁷ The function of this hall underwent an important change in 1589: it became a town hall as we understand the term today, occupied by the newly created Corporation. How did this come about? The previous centuries had been marked by ongoing disputes between the Town Guild and the bishop who still held a lot of power. The Town Guild had acquired various rights through the granting of charters over the centuries and throughout this time they had been keen to flex their muscles and push the boundaries. Successive bishops fought back, reluctant to relinquish power and income, but the town was changing and the bishop's income falling. A key watershed was reached in 1589 when Bishop Godwin granted in an important document his consent for the Guild to seek a new charter from Elizabeth I. Bishop Godwin needed money and, helped by the payment of £100 and £10 per year for three years for his son Thomas⁸ the Town Guild got what they wanted, as the following text shows:

"The Mr, Brethren and other discreete men of the same Towne, haue diu'se tymes made their humble peti'con and suite vnto me, that they by my assente and Consent, might procure and obtayne of her Ma'tie, not onlye a Renewing of their olde and Auncient Lib'tyes which they nowe and of longe tyme haue enjoyed, but also a newe graunte from her Highnes of suche other Lib'tyes, Fraunchises and authorityes vnto them as may be for better Government and orderinge of the sayde Towne and the people thereof: In CONSIDERA'con of all which premises, I the sayde Bisshoppe, haue and doe bye theis presents fullye and willinglye for me and my Successors assente and agree and shal be for euer hereafter very well contented, That the saide Bretheren, or other Incorpora'con of the sayde Towne,

⁶ Scrase, *Wells A Small City*, p 79

⁷ A.J Scrase, *High Street Wells – A Study in Continuity and Change Wells (Natural History and Archaeological Society Reports 1957-1984, 95th & 96th Annual Reports)* p9

⁸ Tony Scrase, *Wells A Small City*, (Stroud, Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2006), p 79

*doe obtayne and get from her Highness anye suche other Libertyes, Franchises, powers or authorityes as it shall please her Ma'tie to graunt vnto them."*⁹

On petition, Elizabeth I granted the town the all-important new rights and enshrined the old ones at the same time, in two charters dating from 1589.¹⁰ One new right was that of the Corporation being allowed its own gaol.¹¹ Until this time, the gaol had been under the control of the Bishop, Dean and chapter. The new town gaol was duly built in 1591 replacing a shop in Middle Row and was known as 'Little Ease'¹². The new town hall was "like many such built on columns with two stalls sited underneath. Access was by a double flight of steps at its eastern end...".¹³ Scrase has an illustration showing the central part of the High Street in 1607 with the Vicars' Shambles, which were made up of small stalls or pens, and a lock up under the new town hall (two shops had been taken over and converted)¹⁴. The gaol was moved about this time to a new site at the City Arms.

Middle Row stayed in the hands of Vicars Choral, Corporation and precentor into the 1700s with market traders continuing to ply their wares and the Corporation using the first floor as their town hall.

Sadly, the Shambles were not to survive. Scrase notes: "In 1754, the Corporation began improvements within Wells with a process that was to clear, over a period of 10 years, all the stalls and the middle row from High Street". The changes were noted to be "for the convenience of the town and particularly the inhabitants of High Street".¹⁵

The Corporation had purchased a couple of adjoining properties on the north side of High Street, one of which was the Queen's Arms, and the gardens behind these were removed and replaced with a yard into which the market stalls were quickly relocated. It took longer for Middle Row to be removed. Early on a dilapidated part of the row of buildings was bought off Vicars Choral who were compensated by being granted an equivalent rent from another Corporation property; this building was then demolished but it wasn't until 1768 that the rest of Middle Row was removed. High Street was now an unobstructed thoroughfare.

⁹ T. Serel, A Lecture on the History of Wells, 1858, p12, quoting from Bishop Godwin's Charter. This is now in Somerset Heritage Centre (DD\HWY/5)

¹⁰ Both charters are preserved in Wells City Archives (WCC/1001/29 and WCC/1001/30).

¹¹ This was granted in the Wells City Archives charter numbered WCC/1001/30

¹² A.J Scrase, High Street Wells – A Study in Continuity and Change Wells (Natural History and Archaeological Society Reports 1957-1984, 95th & 96th Annual Reports) p9

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Scrase, Wells A Small City, p 85

¹⁵ Ibid p 115

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).