

WESTGATE STREET, GLOUCESTER IN 1455

The layout of the streets of modern Gloucester follows very largely that of the historic city - a pattern of Saxon streets, now often lanes, - super-imposed on those of a Roman outline.

But to what extent could it be hoped to trace a continuous line of ownership of anything like a modern site back to that of even medieval times? Of actual buildings themselves, except of course for churches, practically nothing remains. Gloucester has devoted itself, with an enthusiasm worthy of a better cause, to the wholesale destruction of any buildings that might have given us an idea of what the city looked like during its historic past. To guide visitors to what remains of historic Gloucester, it is necessary to know where to go to search it out. The city's oldest inhabited house is a 16th century timber-framed building huddled against the ancient St. Mary's Gate entrance to the precincts of the Cathedral. A few other timber-framed houses in the vicinity of Westgate Street remain to show us what Gloucester looked like in the time of the Plantagenets and Tudors. Many other timber-framed houses are still standing in this street, but are hidden behind the stucco-covered fronts that fashion decreed a couple of centuries or so ago.

The City's archives contain many records showing, through the centuries, the properties on its rolls, and on those of the religious foundations who at one time owned so much of Gloucester, as they did of the country generally.

Probably the best-known survey of property in Gloucester in medieval times is the "Rental of the houses in Gloucester - A.D. 1455." A parchment some 30 feet long, and 14½ inches wide, it was largely the work of Robert Cole, an Austin Canon from the Priory of Llanthony Secunda, which is just outside the old city walls, on the S.W. side. This roll corrected drafts of earlier rentals. In many parts of the rental the two columns represent the two sides of the street, e.g. Southgate Street. In the centre between the columns, from time to time Cole gives sketches of the churches, wells, the pillory and other landmarks found in the middle of the street.

It was decided to start by making a plan showing, from the Cross outwards, the holdings on either side of the street, as shown in the 1455 Rental. An Ordnance Survey map of about 1880 was used to give the outlines of the streets, which in many respects have changed very little. Cole shows who was paying landgavel, or tax. He also says who was the occupant in 1455, and often its former occupants in the reigns of Edward II, Edward I, and Henry III.

To make such a plan was not always as straightforward as might be supposed. Tenements in Westgate Street were described as being in the Mercery, or in the Butchery. The

former ran down the northern side of the street, the latter on the south. A large building ran down the centre of the street, and the northern and southern sides are also parts of the Mercery and Butchery respectively. To decide whether or not a building in the Butchery was part of this central building was not always easy. This building has long ceased to exist.

The position of a certain church, still standing on its ancestral site, often made it possible to orientate oneself, though one might have to make allowance for the churchyard, which often ran along the street, but has long been built over. Buildings now standing on such a site will of course have no mention on a Roll dating as far back as that of 1455. It was refreshing to find a tenement described so clearly as being "at the southern and eastern corner of Scrud Lane", or "at the northern and western corner of Gorlone". The position of other tenements could then be determined in relation to which side of the above-mentioned buildings they stood.

Such a plan having been completed, showing hopefully the position in the four main streets, it remained to trace specific sites, forward from 1455, or backwards from the present day.

When 39 Westgate Street came on the market, towards the end of 1976, a look at the 1455 Rental showed the side as being "on the west side corner of Bull Lane, wherein John Doggett dwells". Payment of landgavel, at 7½d., was the responsibility of the Prior of St. Bartholomew's Hospital.

There is a record of an earlier transaction in 1338, showing a "release from Agnes, widow of John Ireland, goldsmith to the Hospital of St. Bartholomew, of her rights in a tenement in Gloucester, between the tenement of Roger Heued, and the tenement lately held by John of Chedworth at the corner of Gorlone."

Messrs. Bruton Knowles, who were concerned in the disposal of the property, said that they themselves had no deeds or leases, that would help to trace ownership or occupancy of the property. They were however able to provide the name of the firm of solicitors in London which was able to provide details of deeds going back in an unbroken line to 1752. At this date the property was shown as still being on the Rental of the Hospital of St. Bartholomew.

A search of other rentals of that institution, working backwards from 1743, shows that a rental of £3 was paid by Winstone Moore, in that year, as it had been since 1737. From the last year, to 1727, the same rental had been paid by Thomas Moore, and from 1721 to 1726 by Walter Winstone. From that year back to 1664, the same rental was paid either by Thomas Hamme (1664), by his sons William (d.1671), and Samuel (d.1678), the latter's widow, and then jointly by William Hamme and John Commins, till 1698.

In 1655 the rent of £3 was paid to the burgesses and mayor for the Hospital of St. Bartholomew, by Richard Pury. The rental for 1642 shows the lessee to have been a Walter Stafforde, butcher, at the same rental. In March 1609 a lease to the same Walter Stafforde butcher, shows him to have paid a rental of 40/s. per annum.

The period of 1609 to 1455 remains to be investigated.

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