

## The Feoffees of St. Sidwell's Parish, Exeter

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The feoffees of St. Sidwell have administered land and property in their possession for the benefit of the parishioners of St. Sidwell's parish for well over four hundred years, as may be seen in the St Sidwell section of *Exeter Charities 1825, The Report of the Commissioners concerning Charities*. This report gives details of the earliest deeds the Commissioners had seen detailing the individual plots, which had been rented out. The Commissioners refer to 'an indenture of feoffment bearing date 27th July 1688', which included a reference to a deed dated 16 December, 18th Elizabeth (1575). The original deed described parcels of land as lying between the lands of named others on the north, west, east and south, and sometimes citing named highways. In order to clarify the exact position of these plots and properties, the feoffees had a map book drawn up in 1802 which is now in the care of the Devon Heritage Centre (DHC). What is remarkable about these maps is that they show the exact shape of the individual plots as detailed on much later OS maps of 1876 and 1905.

The map book details 27 properties, 25 of which are in the original parish of St. Sidwell, one of which is in the parish of St. Mary Major and one in Thorverton parish. Not all of the plots were originally built on; many were rented out as fields and gardens. The spread of the feoffees' properties, whether described as fields, gardens, orchards, dwelling houses, cottages, shops, inns etc., included land in Paris Street, Cheeke Street (Searles or Cheeks Lane), Summerland Crescent and Summerland Street, Belgrave Road (Spillers or Fox Lane), Sidwell Street, King William Street (Well Lane), Black Boy Road, Jesmond Road (Trewell/Idol/Idle/ Brickhouse Lane), Old Tiverton Road, Union Road (Pester or Pesterhouse Lane), Polsloe Road (Workhouse Lane), Pennsylvania Road and Rosebarn Lane.

Using minute books, charity account books, cash books, correspondence files, Charity Commission papers about parish lands, deeds of appointment of new feoffees, leases, conveyances and sundry other documents connected to St. Sidwell's Church, it has been possible to identify how various properties have been disposed of over the past 200 years and what is still in the feoffees' possession. The earliest property of the 27 listed which was disposed of was a public house called the Peter Bell abutting the original Palace Gate, the property mentioned above in the parish of St. Mary Major. The feoffees owned a moiety (a half or, in this case, three-sixths); William Bligh (of 'Mutiny on the Bounty' fame) and other individuals owned another sixth; and Honor Pring (widow of Daniel Pring) owned two sixths. The whole of the property was conveyed back to Mr. Ralph Barnes of the Dean & Chapter in 1811 so that the building could be demolished along with the original Palace Gate for road-widening purposes. Marker posts were placed on either side of the road, although only one now remains on the opposite side of the road to where the Peter Bell stood.

Another public house, the Axminster Inn and cottages and gardens adjoining at the bottom of Paris Street were sold to Messrs. Norman & Pring in February 1883.

In 1813 the land on which three properties stood in St. Sidwell's Churchyard was conveyed back to the Reverend Ralph Barnes and the properties demolished in order to release more space for

burials. The properties consisted of a dwelling house on the corner of Well Lane adjoining St. Sidwell's Churchyard, a dwelling house and schoolroom in Well Lane, and a tenement known as the Engine House. A lease for 500 years dated 1665 from the feoffees to John Bury clerk, rector of St. Mary Michell alias St. Mary Major, Exeter, describes this as a 'newly repaired tenement or dwelling house consisting of five rooms, that is two ground or under rooms and three higher rooms or chambers over them, adjoining the churchyard and part of the Church House now or late in the tenure of Roger Harte, weaver'. The lease expressed the purpose was 'the better bringing up of poor children to be taught in the Free School'. Rent was 1d – on condition that the house was used as a Free School; if converted to any other use, the feoffees had the power of repossession.

Other properties were sold off during the 1800s and 1900s with consent of the Charity Commission and the proceeds invested. Many properties in the Sidwell Street area suffered extensive damage in the air raids of World War II and were repaired where possible for continued occupation but were compulsorily purchased under the 1953-1955 Central Areas Reconstruction Scheme and the feoffees received compensation for loss of development rights.

In December 1900 an exchange of property took place between the feoffees who owned No. 1 Hampton Buildings, Black Boy Road, and Messrs. Reynolds Bros. who owned land in Toronto Road. Eleven garages were eventually built in July 1957.

Colwell Cottage, Idle Lane (now Jesmond Road) was demolished in October 1966 and an exchange of land with Exeter City Council enabled the feoffees to convert the site into Bowe Court with six flats for elderly people which was completed in March 1975 and officially opened by the Bishop of Exeter, the Rt. Rev. Eric Mercer who praised it 'for its most modern and imaginative approach'. These flats are still in the feoffees' possession along with other flats and houses in Black Boy Road and Hampton Buildings.

A large plot of land extending from Elmside to Spinning Path – but minus the land owned by the Dean & Chapter on which the Bowling Green pub, formerly 'The Ropemakers' Arms, stands – was originally owned by the feoffees. Four houses known as 1-4 St. George's Place (now Nos. 31-34 Black Boy Road and Laurel Cottage behind No. 34 in Elmside) were built between 1832 and 1837. In July 1974 these were scheduled by the Department of the Environment as Buildings of Historic Interest. All have now been sold off, with the last three flats (33, 33a and 33b) being conveyed in July 2014; it is intended that the proceeds will enable the re-development of the site on which the garages are situated in Toronto Road. Part of the remaining field between Hampton Buildings and Spinning Path was sold to the Industrial Dwellings Company in 1874 for the building of Kendall's Buildings.

One of Exeter's more famous residents occupied a house built on land owned by the feoffees. Originally described as 'A Field in Whipping Lane near the Eastern Road to Marlpoolhead', Cobham in Rosebarn Lane was built for Dr. Thomas Shapter who came to Exeter in 1832 at the outbreak of cholera to set up his medical practice. He wrote the definitive work *The History of the Cholera in Exeter in 1832*, published in 1849. He became Mayor of the Corporation in 1847 and his name can be seen in the stained-glass window of the Guildhall, with the date 1848. Dr. Shapter occupied Cobham at the time of the 1881 census. This property was eventually sold in 1937.

The property in Thorverton was described as 'Four houses and Orchard, Rowes Park'. It was sold in 1919. Today it is known as Rosepark.

Not all of the feoffees' 27 properties have been described in detail above but during the course of research over several years all have been identified as to their precise location, when sold or disposed of, and at what price. Some had been leased for a period of years to the more well-to-do residents of Exeter, others at a yearly rent, and yet others at weekly rents. The many minute books dating from 1834-2000 gave some interesting insights into the deliberations of the feoffees. There were frequent themes running through them, such as grants to the poor of the parish when funds permitted, which were suspended for periods when bank balances were too low. Amounts of £1-£2 were recorded. One application was for a rheumatic belt where £1 was authorised but on enquiries being made to its suitability was found to cost 10/- more. 'It was Resolved that the extra sum be granted and the Belt loaned.' There were applications for funds to replace tradesmen's tools and another where a donation of a guinea was made towards providing a set of false teeth.

There were also frequent changes of mind by the committee whether to sell property, repair or rebuild; instances of rent default, giving notice to quit, placing matters in the hands of solicitors, obtaining court orders for eviction, the need for extensive repairs after tenants had given up the property they were renting, dealing with properties over-run with rats, and the problem of squatters when properties were empty for a time, one instance which included extensive damage, the clearing up of rubbish and needles, repairs, replacing carpets and fumigation of the house before it could be re-let. All general repairs needed were noted in the minutes of the Properties Committee, the building firms which were asked to tender for the work which inevitably went to the company submitting the lowest price. Protracted discussions took place regarding the replacement of Webb's Almshouses which were a casualty of World War II along with houses in Black Boy Road extensively damaged in 1940 and 1942 and eventually rebuilt as old people's homes and occupied by 1967.

One of the most interesting items to emerge was the decision to hold a Queen's Jubilee dinner on Tuesday 21 June 1887 for 300 adults of St. Sidwell, the design of the poster to be printed and distributed with adverts placed in the various local newspapers. A sub-committee was appointed with 'Mr. Angel and Mr. Pearse to procure necessary cutlery, dinner ware and glasses and ale and aerated water and table cloths', Mr. Land and Mr. Pasmore the supply of meat; Mr. Marsh and the Chairman [Mr. Force] the supply of bread, puddings and cooking and arrangement of tables etc; Mr Allen the supply of salt, mustard and pickles etc and Mr. Pocknell, tobacco and snuff'. It had originally been intended to provide women with snuff, but this was later changed to a half pound of tea and pound of sugar to each woman and an ounce of tobacco to each man.

The deaths of feoffees were recorded in the minutes and the names of their replacements. Also recorded were the deaths of serving monarchs - Queen Victoria in January 1901, King Edward VII in May 1910 and King George VI in January 1952.

The Properties Committee reported war damage to seventeen properties in Black Boy Road and Sidwell Street belonging to the Charity following enemy action on the night of 3/4 May 1942. In respect of 1/6 Parsonage Court 'The Clerk reported that he had satisfied himself that all the tenants of this Charity had got away safely from the houses but all the tenants in the Sidwell Street area have lost all they possessed. The Local Authority is very slow in tackling first aid

repairs to the damaged houses.' The end of World War II was also recorded in the minutes. 'At 2.41 a.m. on Monday 7th May 1945 the Germans signed instrument of unconditional surrender, to all the Allied Forces of Great Britain, USA and Russia, at Rheims at the Headquarters of General Eisenhower.'

The feoffees contributed to the upkeep of St. Sidwell's Church and the Charity Commissioners' report mentioned above cites an entry in the churchwardens' book in 1766 with the feoffees responsible for payments 'for the work of the carpenter, hellier [roofer], mason, plumber, glazier and smith, about the fabric of the church only; for ropes, oil and leather for the bells; for the repairs of the school house [*probably the small building adjoining the church yard before mentioned*], the high rent to the dean and chapter, and the king's audit'. Meetings were held there before the church was badly damaged in the war. The feoffees' records were kept in two safes housed in the church and the minutes of 10 May 1948 record that they remained under the debris of the church. By 12 September 1949 the safes had been extracted and the contents found to be in good order.

The Charity Commissioners' Report also lists individual charities which were originally overseen by named trustees, but which eventually became the responsibility of the feoffees. These were charities which generated income to be used to support specific causes and stem from wills which were drawn up in the 1600s and 1700s:

- Gifts of Baker and Sandford - Ann Baker's will of 13th July 1689, Christopher Sandford's indenture of 17th December 1689.
- Webb's Almshouse - John Webb's will of 3rd April 1676.
- Moffatt's Gift - John Moffatt's will of 1717.
- Chapple's Gift - William Chapple's will of 31st March 1729.
- Seldon's and Acland's Gifts - Gifts of Lawrence Seldon and Sir John Acland.
- Herman's Gift - Ralph Herman's will of 25th July 1661.
- Cheeke's Gift - John Cheeke's will of 17th April 1678.
- Tooker's Gift - Thomas Tooker's will of 31st March 1640.
- Smalridge's Gift - Thomas Smalridge's will of 21st October 1719.
- Gifts of Hester and Thomas Bussel [no will details].
- Interest of Money Paid by the Chamber of Exeter - by a decree made by the lord keeper on the 6th July 1633.
- Tucker's Gift - James Tucker in 1643.
- Vilvaine's Gift - Dr. Robert Vilvayne by the will of his executor Simon Snow made in 1666.
- Newte's Gift - John Newte, clerk, by his will of 10th January 1715.

These gifts included specifying the binding of up to three children as apprentices to some honest trade or employment; support for four poor almshouse women; help for 10 honest poor housekeepers, living in the parish of Saint Sidwell, not receiving alms; purchase of two changes for two poor persons, viz. a man and a woman; the purchase of six shifts for six poor men; and with several of the charities giving instructions for the distribution of loaves of bread to the poor of the parish.

After more than 400 years, the feoffees of St. Sidwell, probably Exeter's oldest charity, continue to support the parish of St. Sidwell together with St. James and St. Matthew.

Sue Jackson, 22 March 2017

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## Sources

### Devon Heritage Centre:

*Exeter Charities 1825, The Report of the Commissioners concerning Charities.* [West Country Studies Library: B/EXE 361.76]

Records of the Feoffees of St Sidwell's Parish: Administration, Title, Leases, Estate (5807F), especially

- Minute Books, 5807 F/A1-A6 1834-1944, 4671 F/M3 1944-1961 [+ 2 in current Clerk's possession, 1961-2000]
- Leases 5807 L1-L18
- Lease adjoining Church Yard, 5807 L8/1-3
- Lease for 500 years, 1665, 5807 L9/1
- Exchange of lands between Feoffees and F. & E. Reynolds, builders, 5807 F/A 32, 1901

Records of the Feoffees of St Sidwell's Parish: Minutes, Accounts, Estate, Administration, Legal, Title, Leases (4671F), especially:

- Map Book of 1802, 4671 F/E1
- Central Areas Reconstruction Scheme, 4671 F/E15, 1953-1955

Feoffees of St Sidwell's Parish: Rental 69/13/2, 25 March 1778-25 March 1779

Peter Bell Leases, D5/36/1-20

Bargain and Sale of land adjoining church yard between Feoffees and Rev. Ralph Barnes, dated 1st October 1813, 3429A-2PB 6 1813