

= Vicars ' Close , Wells =

Vicars ' Close , in Wells , Somerset , England , is claimed to be the oldest purely residential street with original buildings surviving intact in Europe . John Julius Norwich calls it " that rarest of survivals , a planned street of the mid @-@ 14th century " . It comprises numerous Grade I listed buildings , comprising 27 residences (originally 44) , built for Bishop Ralph of Shrewsbury , a chapel and library at the north end , and a hall at the south end , over an arched gate . It is connected at its southern end to the cathedral by way of a walkway over Chain Gate .

The Close is about 460 feet (140 m) long , and paved with setts . Its width is tapered by 10 feet (3 @. @ 0 m) to make it look longer when viewed from the main entrance nearest the cathedral . When viewed from the other end it looks shorter . By the nineteenth century the buildings were reported to be in a poor state of repair , and part of the hall was being used as a malt house . Repairs have since been carried out including the construction of Shrewsbury House to replace buildings damaged in a fire .

The Vicars ' Hall was completed in 1348 and included a communal dining room , administrative offices and treasury of the Vicars Choral . The houses on either side of the close were built in the 14th and early 15th centuries . Since then alterations have been made including a unified roof , front gardens and raised chimneys . The final part of the construction of the close was during the 1420s when the Vicars ' Chapel and Library was constructed on the wall of the Liberty of St Andrew . The south face includes shields commemorating the bishops of the time . The interior is decorated with 19th century gesso work by Heywood Sumner and the building now used by Wells Cathedral School .

= = Origins = =

The Close owes its origins to a grant of land and buildings by Walter de Hulle , a canon of Wells Cathedral , for the purpose of accommodating chantry priests ; however the land is likely to have been used for a long period before the construction of the close , as prehistoric flint flakes and Romano @-@ British pottery shards were recovered from the garden of number four during work to construct an extension .

Bishop Jocelin styled the priests serving the cathedral as the Vicars Choral , in the 12th century , their duty being to chant divine service eight times a day . Previously they had lived throughout the town , and Bishop Ralph resolved to incorporate them and provide subsistence for the future . The Vicars Choral were assigned annuities from his lands and tenements in Congresbury and Wookey , an annual fee from the vicarage of Chew , and endowed them with lands obtained from the Feoffees of Walter de Hulle . The residences he built became known as the College , or Close of the Vicars .

= = Vicars ' Hall and gateway = =

The entrance arch into the close comprises a pedestrian gate adjacent to a waggon gate , and has a lierne vault ceiling . The four @-@ centered rere @-@ arches may have been by William Joy or Thomas Witney his predecessor as master mason of the cathedral .

The first parts of the Close to be constructed were this first floor barrel @-@ roofed common hall above a store room , kitchen and bakehouse which were completed in 1348 . The fireplace , with a lectern , and the east window with stained glass , were added in the 15th century . A room known as The Chequer above the staircase was added in the early 15th century . It has a large fireplace which may have been enlarged following a fire . One of the monks known as The Receiver sat in the room to receive rents and other funds due to the vicars , which were kept in a large chest dating from 1633 . Next to The Chequer is the Muniment Room which has a filing cabinet dating from around 1420 used to hold documents such as leases of land . Beneath these rooms is The Treasury which has ten cupboards where the vicars vestments were stored .

In the 19th century parts of the hall found use as a malt house , and as a library for the Theological College . The western half of the building was added around 1862 by John Henry Parker .

The Chain Gate , built with Douling stone , was abutted to the hall in 1459 by Thomas Beckington . This included a gallery over the gate into the cathedral for the vicars ' convenience .

= = Vicars ' Chapel and Library = =

The chapel was built between 1424 and 1430 at the north end of the close . It is eight degrees out of alignment with the rest of the close . This is because the northern wall of the chapel was built on top of the old wall enclosing the Liberty of St Andrew . The Liberty encompassed 52 acres (21 ha) broadly situated to the east of the city centre of Wells . The main part of the Liberty formed a walled precinct within the city (which was otherwise not walled) and this included Wells Cathedral , the Cathedral Green , the Bishop 's Palace , the Old Deanery , and the Vicars ' Close . To compensate for the misalignment of the chapel the roof slopes to the west so that it appears level from the close .

Most of the Vicars ' Chapel is rubble masonry however the south face which can be seen from the close is of white Conglomerate quarried locally . The shields on the wall are those of Nicholas Bubwith , suggesting that construction was started during his reign as bishop between 1407 and 1424 , and John Stafford who was bishop from 1424 until 1443 suggesting that construction was completed under his episcopate . The lower floor was a chapel , and a spiral stair led up to the library . The chapel was dedicated to the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Katherine . It is now used by the chaplain of Wells Cathedral School . The interior is decorated with 19th century gesso work by Heywood Sumner .

= = Residences = =

The residences are built of stone from the Mercia Mudstone Group . There were originally 22 houses on the east side and 20 on the west . They line each side of a quadrangle which appears longer than it is because of false perspective achieved by building the houses at the upper northern end nearest the chapel 9 feet (2 @. @ 7 m) closer together than those at the lower southern end closest to the Vicars ' Hall . Each house originally comprised a ground floor hall of approximately 20 by 13 feet (6 @. @ 1 by 4 @. @ 0 m) and an upper floor of the same size . Both had a fireplace in the front wall . Washing facilities and a latrine were outside the back door . The date of some of the buildings is unclear but it is known that some had been built by 1363 and the rest were completed by 1412 . There were originally 42 houses each for one vicar , however in a charter of c.1582 Queen Elizabeth restricted the number of vicars to twenty , and the Vicars Choral currently number twelve men . No. 1 Vicars ' Close was once a larger property , but has since been divided and part of the building is now called No. 1 St. Andrew Street .

Following the 15th century Reformation when clerical marriage was permitted , larger households would have been required and as a result some of the houses were altered and combined by knocking through walls , into larger dwellings . Others had extensions built to the rear . Water supply was originally from two wells , one at each end of the close . By 1468 lead pipes had been installed to bring water into the houses , although the wells continued to function until the 19th century . Number 22 is the house which still has most of its original medieval structure as it was originally built .

In the fifteenth century , Bishop Thomas Beckington left much of his estate to the Vicars ' Choral , enabling repairs to be carried out . The gardens in front of the houses were not part of the original scheme with the garden walls being added as part of this development . The walls are on average 4 metres (13 ft) from the front of the houses . He unified the appearance of the terraces including the installation of a single arch @-@ braced and wind @-@ braced trussed sloping roof around 1466 . The chimney shafts were renewed and raised , possibly because of the introduction of coal as the fuel rather than wood . Each stack incorporates two heraldic shields and the upper sections of the stacks are octagonal . The shields are those of the Bishop , a beacon above tun , and the arms of his three executors ; sugar loaves for Hugh Sugar , three swans for Richard Swan , and the talbot for John Pope . Many of the original windows were replaced in the 18th century . Shrewsbury House

is architecturally different from all the other buildings . It was re @-@ built in the 19th century after a fire that burnt down the original structure .