

Exeter Medieval Trail



Exeter City Council



Medieval A-Z

Exeter's medieval street plan expanded on the old Saxon grid of North Street, South Street and Market Street (now known as High Street and Fore Street). In the West Quarter the street layout has changed very little since that time with street names revealing a snapshot of what life was like then.

In Smythen Street blacksmiths hammered metal, while parish priests lived in Preston Street, and Milk Street was home to milk sellers. At the top of Smythen Street was Butchers Row with a long row of butchers stalls laden with freshly slaughtered meat.

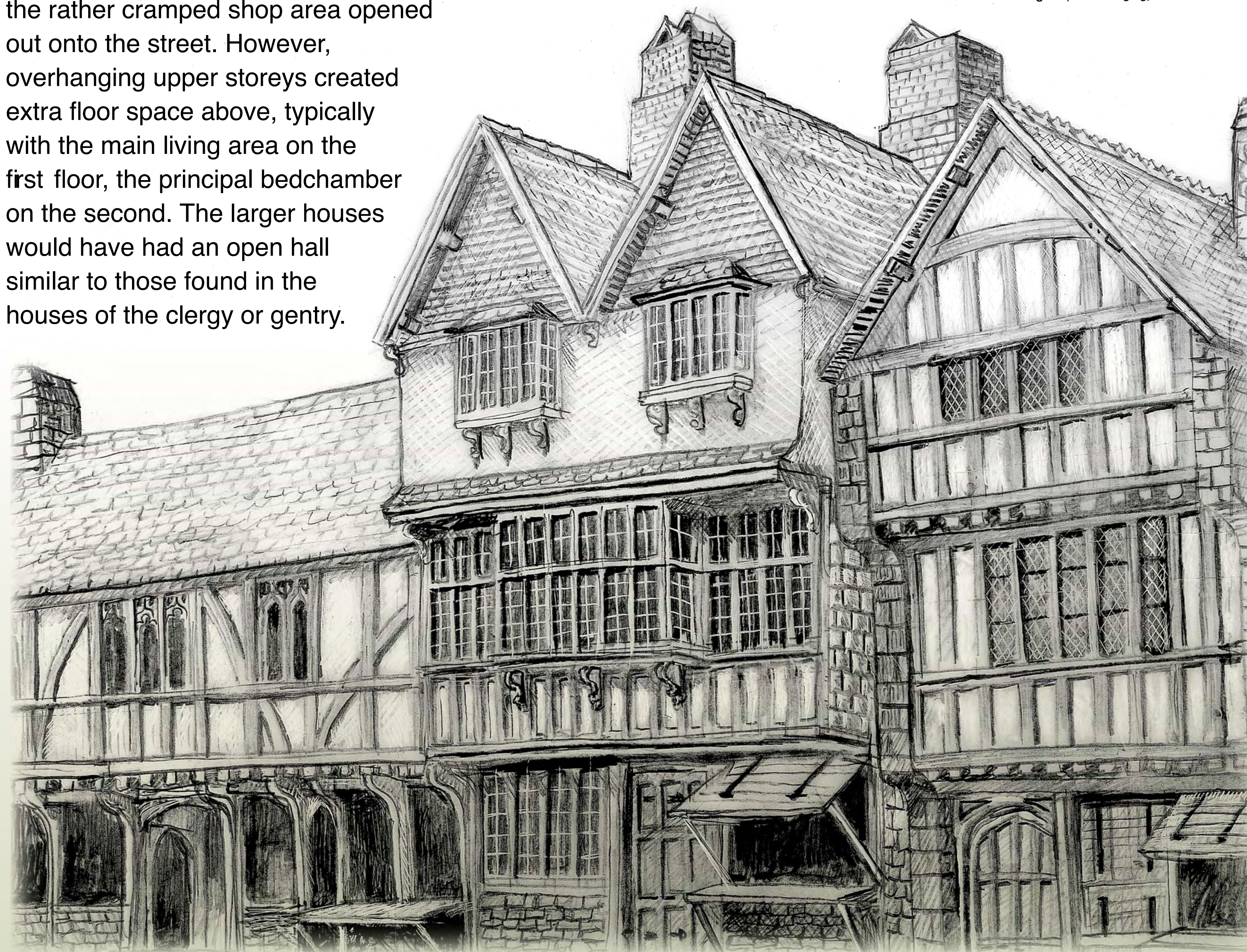
House and home

Many medieval buildings still survive in Exeter, including fine examples of merchant houses like 43-44 and 46-47 High Street. A typical merchant's house was two or three storeys high and rectangular in shape with its gable end facing the street. On the ground floor the rather cramped shop area opened out onto the street. However, overhanging upper storeys created extra floor space above, typically with the main living area on the first floor, the principal bedchamber on the second. The larger houses would have had an open hall similar to those found in the houses of the clergy or gentry.

Poor people could not afford such houses, but lived in one room huts built of cob and timber frames with a thatched roof. Huts like these crowded the slums outside the city wall in areas like Exe Island and St. Sidwell's.



Aerial Photograph showing how little the street plan of the West Quarter of the city has changed (© Stillimaging)



Merchant Houses on South Street (Formerly South Gate Street) (© R.W. Parker Exeter Archaeology)



No 46 High Street by S Endacott (© RAMM)



This is one of the oldest surviving buildings on Exeter High Street

Population rise and fall

The Domesday Book of 1086 recorded 399 houses in Exeter suggesting a population of around 2000, and by the 13th century this number had increased to between 3-4,000. Then in 1348-9 the terrible Black Death came, killing almost one third of Exeter's population.

However, by the end of the medieval period in 1525 Exeter had recovered to become the 4th largest provincial English town with a population of 8,000 people.

People with similar jobs often lived on the same street, which influenced the street's name.



More Exeter medieval street names

Waterbeer Street was home to water bearers who collected drinking water daily from the river, goldsmiths lived in Goldsmith Street, and Rack Street was named after the racks where clothworkers hung woollen serge to dry.

Cobbled Gandy Street dates from this period. Although no medieval buildings now remain, it is easy to imagine the days when it was lined with busy leather workers' shops and known as Corre Strete – Old English for curing of leather.



Gandy Street (© Tony Howell)

