

Exeter Medieval Trail



Exeter City Council



A Busy Trading Centre

In medieval times Exeter was the economic centre for the region. The city's industrial quarter at Exe Island bustled with cloth and corn mills, breweries and foundries with water power supplied by leats.

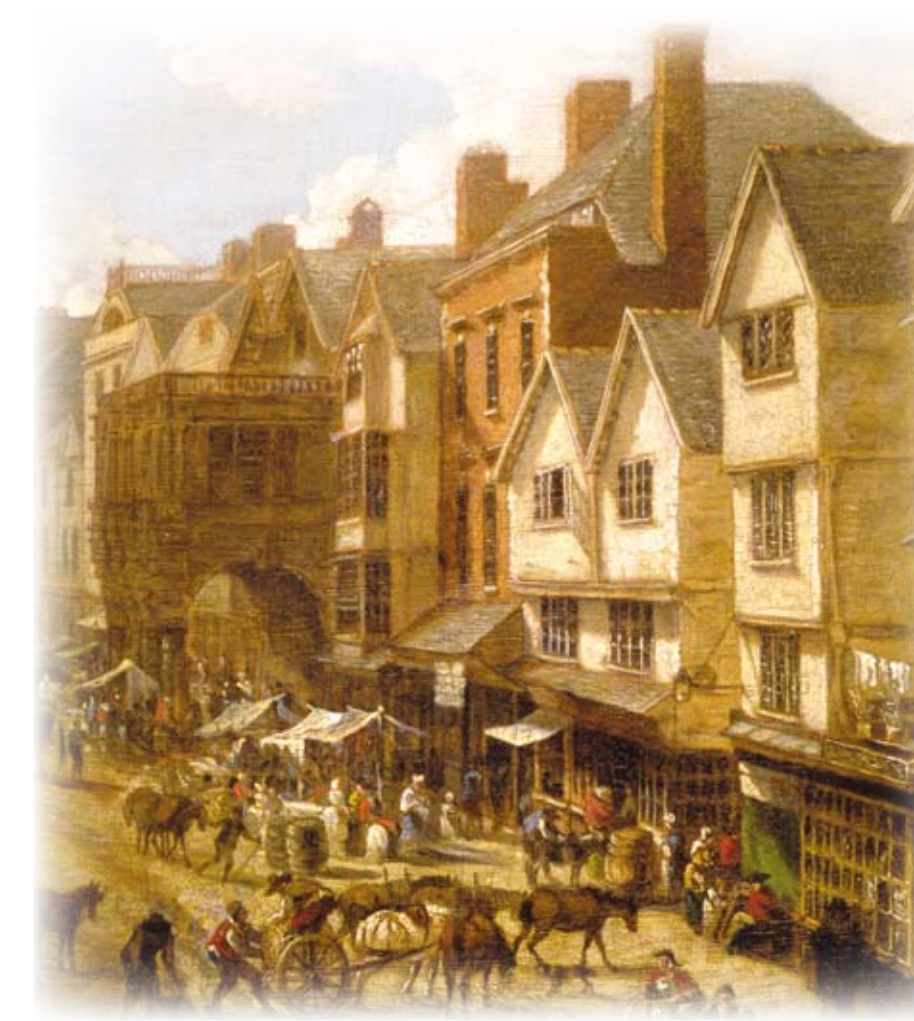
However, it was cloth that brought the real wealth. To maintain Exeter's reputation as a major cloth trade centre, trade guilds formed such as the powerful Guild of Weavers, Fullers, and Shearmen which still operates today.



The gate of Tuckers Hall, home to one of the city's most powerful guilds, 'The Incorporation of Weavers, Fullers and Shearmen'. The tools of their trade are shown in the gate (© RAMM)

Markets and fairs

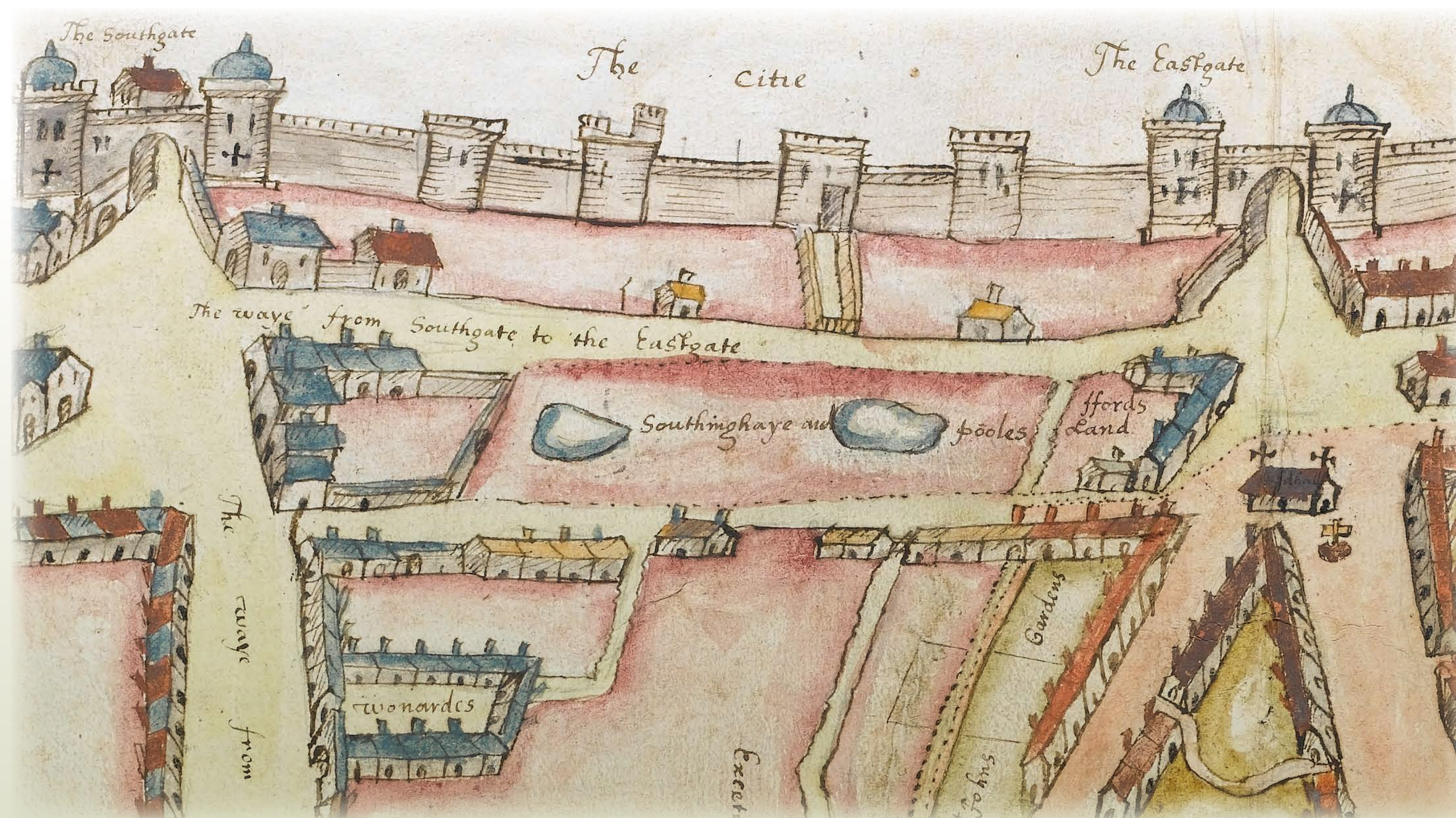
Nearby towns could not compete with Exeter which held the largest and most frequent markets in Devon; it had three market days a week. Exeter also had seven annual fairs when all other trading stopped. Held on saint's feast days they were religious holidays, and were often rowdy, drunken affairs. These markets and fairs generally took place along the High Street and Fore Street.



Market on Exeter High Street by John White Abbott (© RAMM)

Big business

Fairs and markets were a valuable asset, and stallholders had to pay a fee known as 'stallage' to trade, although this money was bitterly fought over by the city and the Earls of Devon. In 1322 violence broke out during the Lammas Fair when city bailiffs demanded merchants pay their stallage first.



A section from Hooker's view of the eastern side of the city circa 1590. Croiditch, the open space between the East Gate and South Gate was the original home to the Lammas Fair (Source, D&C, Exeter 3530)

Exeter fairs

The oldest fair dating back to 1130 was the three-day Feast of St. Nicholas in early December. The Lenten Fair (known locally as the Fish Fair) took place on Ash Wednesday, followed by the Good Friday Fair, the Whitsun or Pentecost Fair in late May, the Feast of Mary Magdalen on the 22nd July, and St. Thomas' Fair on 21st December.

Only the Feast of Mary Magdalen had a charter, suggesting the others were already well established before this requirement was introduced in the 13th century.



Exeter's Lammas Fair

One medieval fair, Lammas Fair, is still celebrated in Exeter. The first recorded Lammas Fair (or Croiditch Fair) took place at Croiditch (now Southernhay) to celebrate the Feast of St. Peter in 1163.

The fair displayed a large white glove symbolising royal protection, and today this ancient tradition continues. The Glove on a long pole decorated with ribbons and flowers is hoisted above the Guildhall to a loud shout of "The Glove is Up!"

Fairs could become rowdy and unruly places
— crime was not uncommon!

