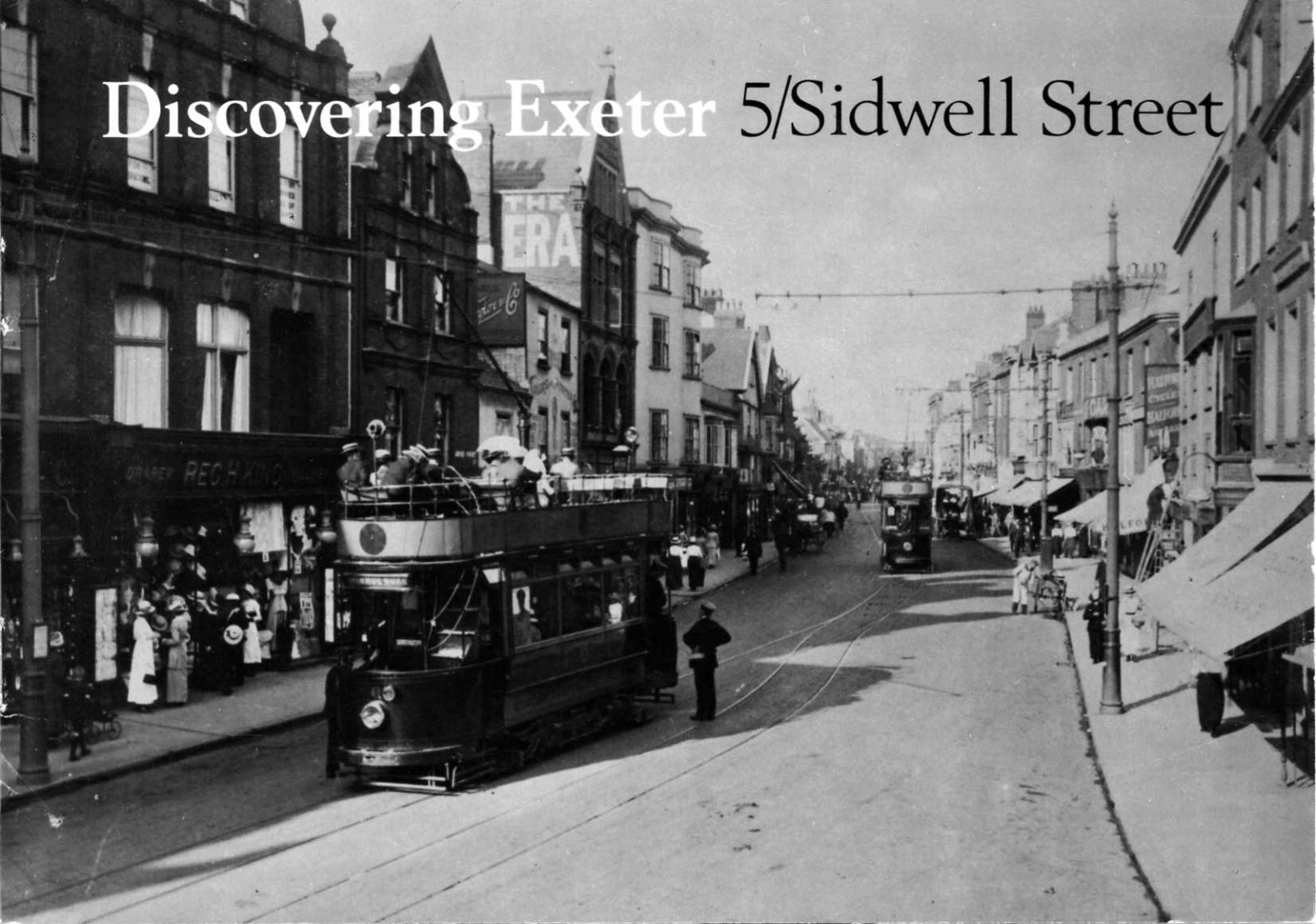
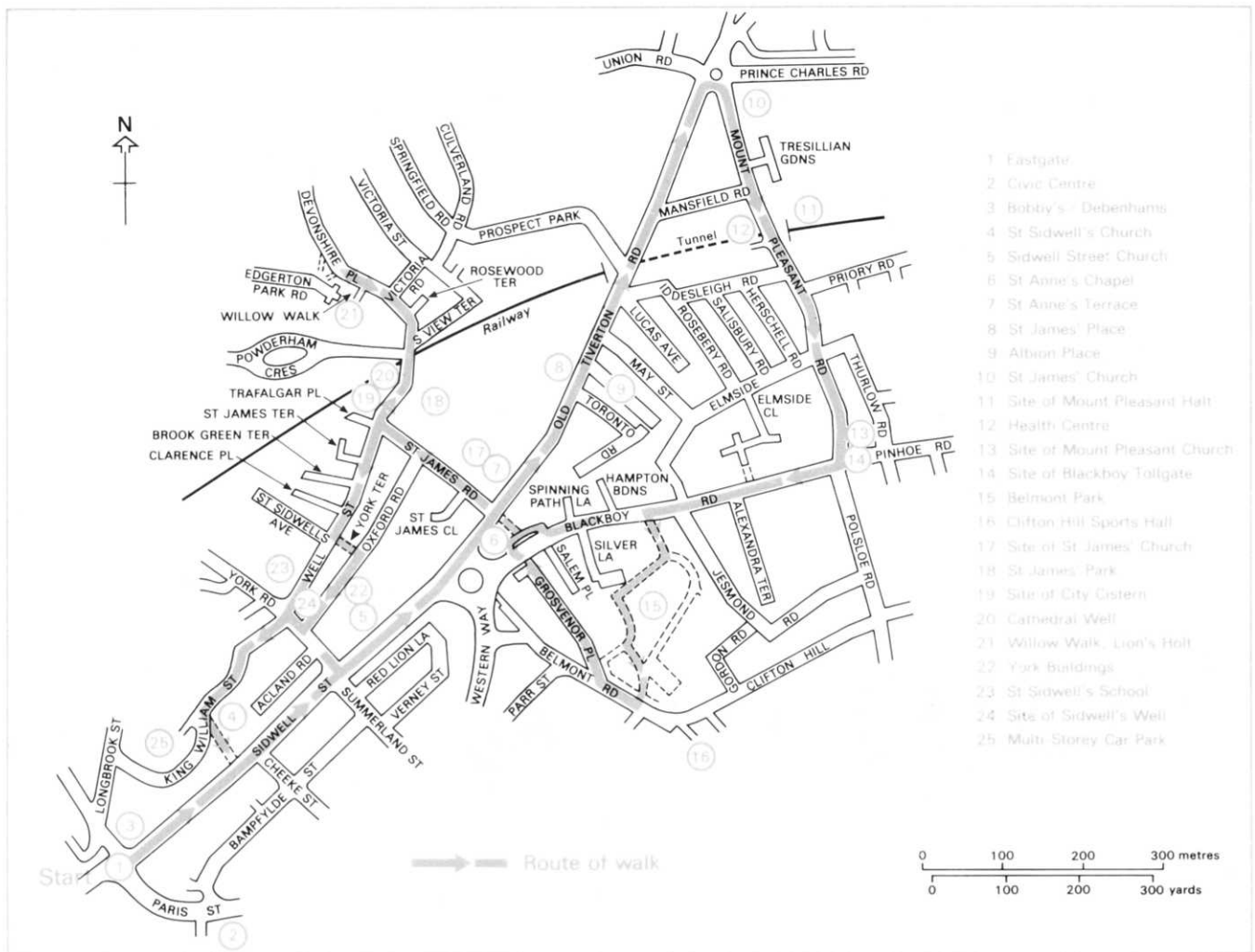


Discovering Exeter 5/Sidwell Street





Exeter Civic Society 1986

Sidwell Street

by Hazel Harvey

Note of series

Discovering Exeter:

- 1 St David's, by Joyce Greenaway
- 2 St Leonard's, by Gilbert Venn
- 3 Heavitree, by Trevor Falla
- 4 Pennsylvania, by Hazel Harvey
- 5 Sidwell Street, by Hazel Harvey

Front cover: *Trams in Sidwell Street circa 1915*
(P Thomas, *The Isca Collection*)

Back cover: *Sidwell Street skyline* (John Saunders)

Foreword

This, the fifth booklet on the inner suburbs of Exeter, completes the coverage around the City centre on the eastern side of the river. It is a pleasure and a surprise that Mrs Harvey has found so much of interest in a suburb with no grand period houses or well-treed estates.

Sidwell Street and its surrounding area originated as a beyond-the-walls market and modest residential area for working people within convenient walking distance of the City, an idea now happily back in fashion. It has developed as an important shopping extension to the High Street, with pubs, churches and cinemas for which there is little room in the City centre. With the development of the new shopping complex on the much-lamented, soon-to-be-built-upon London Inn Square — which, despite the efforts of the Civic Society, could not be saved as an open space at the end of the High Street — this trend will continue.

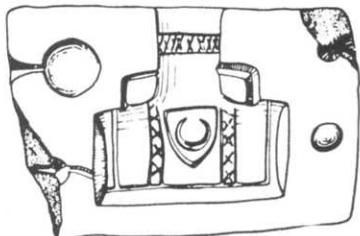
The name of the parish's patron saint long ago absorbed the word "well", as well it might — for centuries this area was vital for the City's water supply. The water flowed from the porous red sandstone bedrock, fed by springs and seepage from the harder grey Culm sandstone and shillet of Stoke Hill.

The parish had its own civic life, until absorbed into Exeter: a mayor and bailiffs quarrelling with the City and Cathedral authorities, vociferous clergymen and controversies worthy of Trollope... there is a rich fabric of community life and happening in the parish, and we are indebted to Mrs Harvey for bringing it out in such a handsome booklet.

D J C Laming
Chairman Exeter Civic Society

Historical Introduction

Only Exeter has a street called Sidwell Street. Sidwell is regarded as Exeter's own saint, martyred near the corner of Well Street and York Road. Her burial place attracted so many pilgrims in the Middle Ages that our Tourist Board might do well to revive her cult for the 1990s.



Mould for casting pilgrims' badges in the form of a costrel for holy water, found on the site of High Street Woolworths

Sidwell Street continues Exeter High Street but has its own identity. The area outside the East Gate has always been distinct from the city. For centuries St Sidwell's had its own mayor, bailiffs and guildhall. The city itself has always been prosperous and cosmopolitan, thronged with foreign merchants dealing in luxury goods. In contrast, Sidwell Street sold, and still sells, things that people actually need: food, drink, books and tins of paint. These are now unobtainable in the High Street since it was pedestrianised and therefore largely given over to shoe-shops.

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At first glance the Sidwell Street area does not appear to have preserved anything of historical interest. Red and yellow mini-buses scurry to and fro; shoppers park and double-park in front of the supermarkets, or stream onto the wide pavements from the bus station and the multi-storey car park which lie on either side behind the shops. Pictures of how the street used to look are preserved on old postcards, or in the memories of the shoppers who can still visualise the bicycle shop next to the churchyard, the old Lipton's with parallel tiled counters, George's bookshop when it was Mr Blakey's and stood at the back corner of a covered arcade. Remember when Sidwell Street had its own Woolworth's? — then you must be at least three years old.

Older inhabitants remember pre-war St Sidwell Street, before half of it was blitzed in 1942 and much of the rest was demolished in the 1960s. Horse-brasses shone on the ponies waiting outside Hammett's Dairy, their carts full of milk churns. Between the shops and the many pubs were side-alleys leading to enclosed courts with cottages packed in at right-angles to the street. These were not gloomy slums but tight-knit communities in secluded closes — "little havens, another world, trees right up to the sky." They have all been cleared away, and so have the adjacent streets of terraced houses which provided old St Sidwell's Church with a large congregation. The present scene is dominated by the elongated rectangles of large stores, and the traffic which they attract. In the evening the shops are shut, and the pavements are empty.

Sidwell Street and its suburb owe their existence to the lie of the land. The walled city of Exeter stands on a spur above the river, and the ground falls away steeply to the north, the west and the south. The only level approach is from the north-east

Historical Introduction



(P Thomas, Isca Collection)

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