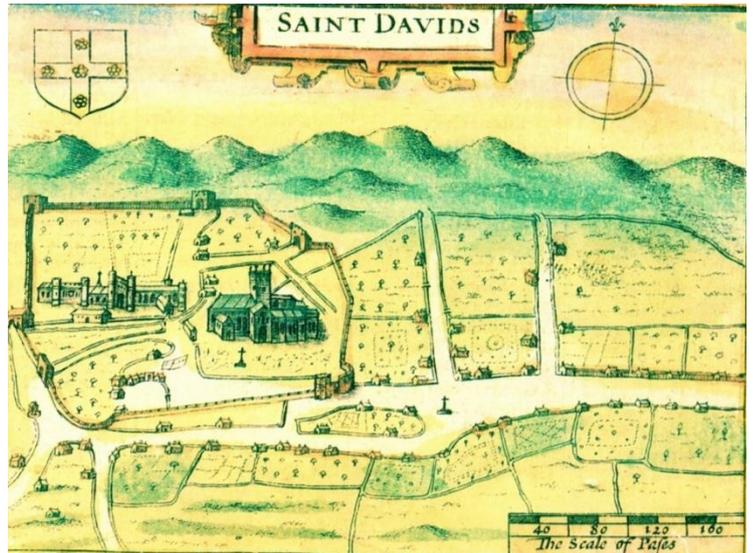


Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

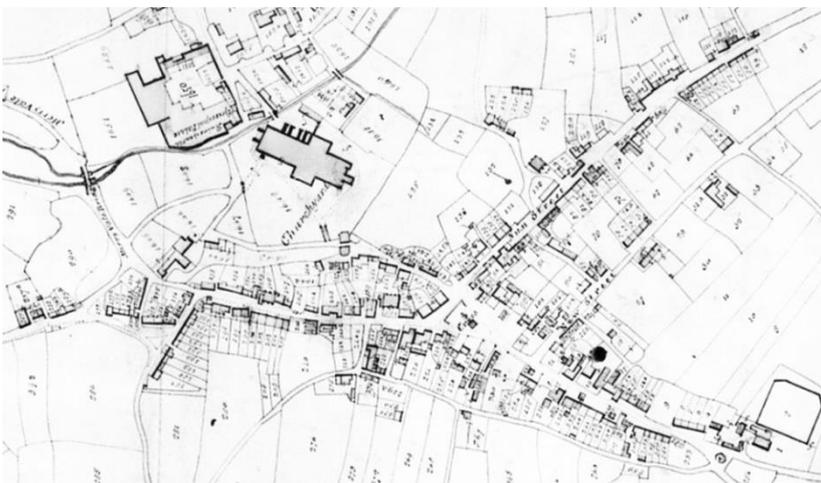
2018 Exhibition ... St David's - Then and Now A Comparative History of Over 100 Years

Much of the recent growth of St David's occupies a very short – and recent – section of the city's timeline. A report on the settlement more than two centuries ago claimed, according to *'Sunday at Home'* (an anonymous piece published by the Religious Tract Society, September 1869) ... *'St David's is a remote, decayed hamlet in a wild, bare country, famous however for its ancient ecclesiastical ruins, and its sublime natural scenery ... You pass through the decayed streets of the obscure hamlet that has never dared to put in its proper claim as a cathedral city'*.

The houses outside of the walls of the Cathedral Close were largely incidental to the business that went on inside and following the English Reformation, in the 16th century, Henry VIII's Dissolution of the Monasteries meant a dramatic decline in visitor-numbers. This meant any income they generated disappeared and all financial patronage ceased. At the time of producing his map in 1610 John Speed's description of St David's is as "A City with few Inhabitants, and no more houses than are inserted in the draft; yet hath it a faire Cathedral Church" (this amounted to around 50 dwellings outside of the Close Wall and by 1715 records indicate just 78 small inhabited houses, in total, in St David's).



There followed a long period of relative stagnation with little to draw either trade or visitors and consequently there was neither the need nor the money to invest in new building. The decline of the Cathedral matched the decline in the settlement - both heavily reliant on the income from the pilgrims. In 1862 Rev Henry James Vincent, a former pupil of the Cathedral Grammar School, stated: *"The city of St David's does not seem to participate in the progress which characterises the 19th century. With the exception of two or three new houses, which renders the old ones more unsightly, it retains the same state of wretchedness as it did 50 years ago"*.



The Tithe Map of 1840 shows how little development there was with growth along the main route-ways - from the harbour at Porthclais and from Haverfordwest and later from Fishguard. The streets were narrow - the traffic by donkey or horse-back, cart or on foot. Poorer cottages opened onto the road whilst houses had gardens by the front door, for vegetables or pigs - and so were set back. Most dwellings had a strip of land and some newer properties were built in the yards or gardens of older buildings. An account of St David's from

1856 states *"The Traveller finds himself descending a gentle declivity into something like a Town, consisting chiefly of mean houses, a few of them thatched, and all of course white-washed and built so irregularly, as scarcely deserve the appellation of a street. Most have pigsties in front"*. (Jones & Freeman, History and Antiquities of the Cathedral of St David's).

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Even as late as the time of the aerial photographs of the Cathedral and Cross Square (1960s) there is very little to show of the later developments around New Street and Back Lane (later Bryn Road).



As well as the obvious streets that make up Britain's smallest city: High Street Cross Square, Goat Street, Nun Street and New Street the Exhibition deals with many of the important out-lying locations that give St David's its unique character. Using photographs - from the society's Image Archive, old maps, census records and some of the many books written about St David's - alongside modern images (which in turn will become part of the society's archive ... as some sites were changing even as they were recorded eg the school) it has been intended as a true representation as possible of 'Then and Now'.

As late as 1868 sources continue to refer to "the mean streets of the decayed village" and "Houses which ... for the most part (are) meanly built and covered with Thatch and are invariably smeared with either yellow or white-wash". In 1888 visitors arriving in St David's were faced with 'a straggling line of cottages which formed the entrance to this remote city' (High Street). By the end of the 19th century much of the centre of St David's had undergone a remarkable transformation ... with the small cottages of previous centuries having been replaced by more substantial slate-roofed Victorian-style 'Villas'. Papers of Samuel Williams refer to "considerable rebuilding in the 1870s, a filling-in of gaps in the streets, the building of 'our terrace' and of old houses being pulled down in Nun Street and three houses built of the site by Captain John Davies". (D.W.James) Even the 'mean streets' had been dramatically improved with stone-lined drains to carry away surface run-off and by the mid 20th century these building projects had created a thriving small city - despite the fact that by the time of the 1971 census St David's had a population of a little over 1,600 compared with over 2,400 a century before! Some aspects of St David's will have changed little over the centuries and people continue to come to gather beneath the Old Cross ... through more appealing streets than may have at one time welcomed visitors!

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For more detailed information and images of the streets themselves please purchase a copy of the booklet which accompany the exhibition.

