

Cymdeithas Hanesyddol Tyddewi a Phebidiog St Davids and Dewisland Historical Society

Houses of the Close Right Reverend J. Wyn Evans



As a result of repeated destruction of St Davids in the centuries before the Norman Conquest the Cathedral, Bishop's Palace and Close trace their roots largely to Bishop Bernard (1115-48). Over the following centuries the Close developed as buildings were added – Bishop Bek (1280-93) ordered canons to enclose their houses and in 1326 the 'Black Book' records a wall enclosing the Close - both a sanctuary and a sacred place and to defend the episcopal and prebendal houses. Henry de Gower (1328-47) appears to have inherited a largely empty precinct but proceeded to have his palace built – whilst also ordering all ruinous properties demolished and the materials to be used for the repair of others to enforce

the residence of the canons by ensuring they had a house fit to live in (to safeguard the canons, vicars and ministers of the cathedral!) Subsequent bishops continued to order the repair of the gates and walls not only to enclose the sacred space and create a sanctuary around the Cathedral but also to keep potential vandals (and nere-do-wells) out at night once the gates had been closed. In addition to the houses the Close would have enclosed all the necessary services to support the people – including a slaughterhouse, dovecote, Brewhouse, bakery etc. Within the Close the land was eventually subdivided into a number of walled precincts containing the Cathedral, the Bishop's Palace, the St Mary's and the Vicars Colleges and the houses and grounds of the various canons of the Cathedral Chapter ... at one time there were nine major houses, each with their gardens and orchards.

Over the next three centuries bishops declined in power and wealth and the Palace and Close would have reflected this until the Reformation – when the lead was removed from the Palace roof and bishops moved their seat to Abergwili (though bishops continued to come to St Davids for visitations and ordinations). By the 18th century (at the time of Joseph Lord's map of 1720) whilst the Palace was 'decayed', and several poor families lived in cottages built within its walls, other houses within the Close had suffered a similar fate – and the houses of the Archdeacons of Carmarthen and Cardigan had disappeared altogether. Rather than the present arrangement of a single house, set back from the



road, the 1720's map showed the original Medieval pattern of groups of buildings – which included the Great Hall and all the services ranges around a courtyard – set alongside the road. Only the Treasury and what was the Prebendary of St Nicholas' house still retained this older footprint.



Bridge House and Cloister Hall were rebuilt on the site of St Mary's College and for many years Bridge House was occupied by one of the Vicar's Choral. During the major restoration of the Cathedral throughout the 19th century work was extended outwards to tackle the ruined buildings of the Close and the Deanery (formerly the Chaunter's House) was rebuilt, with a substantial amount of the earlier buildings surviving despite the Victorian Gothic-Revival exterior. The Archdeacon of Brecon's House was rebuilt around 1820 and the Chancellor's House in 1845. The 1830s saw the rebuilding of the Treasury, though on the original site and the Archdeaconry may have been rebuilt at the same time. At the time of the 1861 National



Census the Chancellor's House was occupied by a Baronet and this reflected the tendency of some canons when not in residence to let their houses! This is why residents of the Close appear in the National Census as surgeons, teachers, stone masons ... and even a Master Mariner ... rather than member of the chapter.

