

## **St David's Neighbourhood and Exeter Community Centre: History**

### **Introduction:**

**This document was produced as part of our project 'Past Present Future', which collected memories about St David's past, the present ideas of the area by the people who live here and their thoughts about how it could be better in the future.**

**Through late 2013 and early 2014 local people collected memories of the area from people who lived and worked here since the 1930s, as well as researching the longer history of the area.**

**In September 14 we held an exhibition in Exeter Community Centre to display the memories, hear the recordings and see the artwork created during this Project. We hope enjoy this brief our history of Exeter Community Centre and our area – Exeter Community Centre Trustees**

The history of Exeter Community Centre is first as a Georgian merchant's house, then later as an institutional residential school for the blind, then from the 1970s as an Adult Learning and Community Centre. Having been most recently owned by Devon County Council, the freehold of the building was transferred to Exeter Community Centre Trust in 2011 after the local community had raised £1.6 million for the Centre's refurbishment. The Trust re-opened the Centre in June 2012. It provides a community hub, offices for social enterprises and activities for the people of Exeter. It will remain in perpetuity an asset owned by the people of St David's.

### **The Area**

St David's Hill was the main route northwards out of the Roman city. First and second century Roman remains, including a possible timber building, were discovered immediately to the rear of the Community Centre in 2009 during the residential development undertaken there, and occasional funerary remains are known from further north.

St David's was also the site of the rebel encampment during the siege of the City during Prayer Book Rebellion of 1549.

In medieval times and later, Mount Dinham and St David's, being just outside the city walls were areas of licentiousness, carnivals and fairs. St Michael and All Angels church, the spire of which is visible from the Centre, the Primary School and the Community Centre may all have been

created as an attempt to generally clean up the area and socially reform it.

In 1834 the construction of a new bridge over the steep sided Longbrook Valley was commissioned, immediately in front of the North Gate. The ancient gate had been removed in 1769 to open up this entrance to the city.

The original approach road to the city, Lower North Street was narrow and difficult for horse drawn vehicles - in fact the valley was known as The Pit due to its steep sides and depth. Up to twenty pairs of horse drawn carts carrying lime from the lime kilns in St Leonards area would pass up South Street, and down the 10 ft wide North Street and Lower North Street, creating blockages, on their way to St David's Down and beyond. The bridge was built parallel to, and on the left side of Lower North Street, blocking the two lower floors of the Crown and Sceptre, now the present City Gate, and houses on that side of the approach. Their second floors became the new entrances, and the blocked in floors, defacto cellars.

The Barnstaple Inn on the opposite side of the road from the Crown and Sceptre was an important coaching inn before the Iron Bridge was constructed. The inn was taken over by Harding and Richards with the rear becoming the St Anne's Well Brewery. A small footbridge from the Iron Bridge, across Lower North Street to the first floor of the Barnstaple Inn was installed, giving access to the bridge from the brewery. The fixings can still be seen in the Iron Bridge.

The bridge was cast in 1834-5 at the ironworks of Russell and Brown of Blaina, Monmouthshire, at a cost of £3,500. The cast-iron parts were brought on the Atlas by sea from Newport and up the Exeter Ship Canal and unloaded at the canal basin. At 800 ft the bridge has six, 40ft arches and a 26 ft roadway that was now wide and flat across the valley from St David's Down to the city. Each arch has six iron ribs which are cast in two pieces. The masonry abutments at each end were built by Thomas Whitaker, who had been given the contract to pave the footpaths of the High Street with Yorkshire stone in the previous year. He must have done a good job at the bridge for he was subsequently given the job of City Surveyor, a position which he held until at least 1878.

The new bridge made it much easier for the coach and horses, and the Crown and Sceptre coaching inn, the last to be built in the city, opened on the bridge. The doors of the inn were wide enough to take the six-horse coaches from Barnstaple. The bridge was not universally popular, and even as late as 1840 some thought it a "lasting monument of folly and wasteful expenditure."

In 1909, the cast iron plates of the roadway were covered in concrete, and in 1984, this was replaced with reinforced concrete. Because of the growth of traffic crossing the bridge in the late 20th Century, a weight restriction was imposed and a narrow, single car width roadway installed at each end of the bridge. <sup>1</sup>

### **The Community Centre Building**

The central block of the building is of the middle Georgian period probably built as a residential townhouse for a merchant and dated around 1740-1760. There are then additions from the late 18th and early 19th century to the west and east, dated to 1790-1820 when the property was still probably a private dwelling.

Further phases from the 1860s, 1880s and 20th century all substantially altered and enlarged the building and co-incide with the building becoming first an institution school for the blind and then a community centre. The inner vestibule/entrance hall in the middle of the building, with attractive fanlight over the door dates from this early period, as does the staircase. During refurbishment in 2011 it was found that much of the original cornices, mouldings and plasterwork were removed in previous renovations and additions. What remains has been retained, under modern suspended ceilings in the building.

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<sup>1</sup> Source Exeter Memories [www.exetermemories.co.uk](http://www.exetermemories.co.uk)



Figure 1: Entrance hall with original cornice 1740. Photo 2011

Figure 2: Staircase Entrance Hall 1740. Photo 2011

### **A School for the Blind**

In 1838, John Bacon with Mrs Sarah Friend called a meeting to establish a school for the blind in Exeter.

Mrs Friend had been aware of the need for such an institution after she had instructed six blind children on the gospels using the Lucas System. Initially named, The West of England Institute for the Instruction and Employment of the Blind, it was situated in a room, hired for the sum of 20 guineas per year, at the Athenaeum, Bedford Circus. The school was innovative for its time and the staff tried different methods of reading, and eventually adopted the use of stenographic characters and raised Roman capitals.

Between 1840 and 1843, the school was housed in premises in Paul Street, that were paid for by public subscription. The school flourished as the city's blind were encouraged to attend by local doctors and clergymen. The first teacher to be employed earned 12 shillings (60 pence) per week, and basket-making and stocking-knitting were introduced activities.

The Paul Street premises were soon outgrown, and the school moved, in 1843, to a donated house in St David's Hill – now Exeter Community

Centre . It was supported by subscriptions, donations and the pupils paying for their board. Whites Devonshire Directory lists Mrs Friend as the Superintendent in 1850, at a time when the school had 17 pupils learning to read and make baskets. In addition, they could learn music, mat making and worsted work.

Music was added to the curriculum and many pupils learnt to use a specially developed, raised music notation and some even went on to become piano tuners. In 1893, another school room was built at the St David's Hill site to accommodate 20 boys and 20 girls.

By 1911, the numbers had risen to 70 children and 12 adults. The school continued to prosper and by 1930, there were 188 blind persons registered, of which 73 were elementary pupils, 8 technical pupils, 20 workshop employees, 50 home workers and 4 with other employment.

In 1944, after the Education Act required that the blind and partially sighted be educated separately, the blind children were transferred to the Bristol Blind School, and the St David's Hill school renamed the West of England School for the Partially Sighted. In 1965, the school moved to a site at Countess Wear that incorporated a Nursery, Main School, College and St David's House. <sup>2</sup>

In 2014 Exeter Community Centre several pupils who were previously residential pupils of the West of England School in the 1940s, 50s and 60s and can remember vividly that girls slept in dormitories the garden side of the School and boys slept the St David's Hill road side. They have also told us of the pantomimes that were performed in the Ballroom – then the main school hall. Their memories are celebrated in a stained glass panel in the Exeter Community Centre, created by them in tandem with a local artist. A book of memories of the West of England School for the Blind, written by one of the residents is on sale in the Centre.

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<sup>2</sup> The Trust is grateful to West Of England School for Young People with Little or No Sight for this information which can also be found at [www.exetermemories.co.uk](http://www.exetermemories.co.uk)



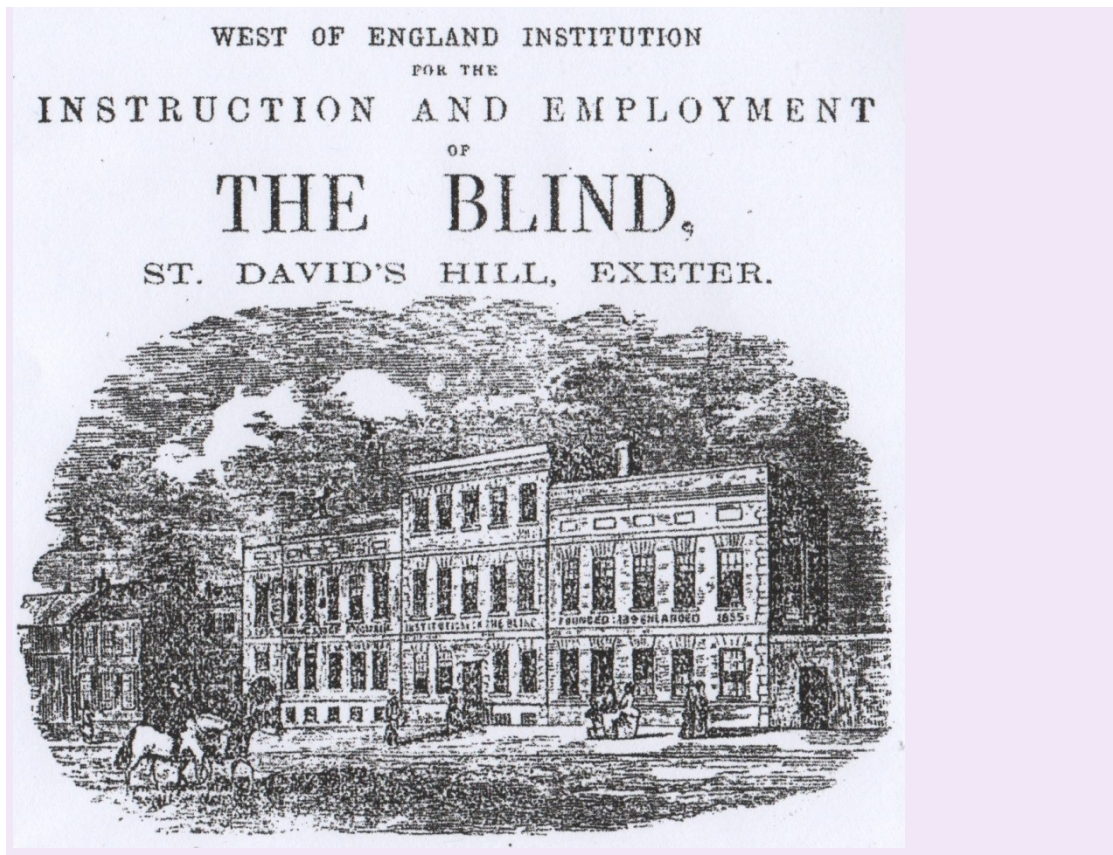


Fig 3: The Building in 1881

## The People

Following the floods in St David's, St Thomas and Exwick in 1960, it was determined that a new community centre was needed. The opportunity arose for Exeter City Council to acquire the building from West of England School for the Blind, but there was no money available to refurbish it from a residential school to a community centre. Much of the work was therefore done by local volunteers, ripping out old dormitories and bathrooms and creating rooms for meetings and spaces for leisure and learning activities, as well as a social bar, wooden skittles alley, flat at the top of the building for the residential caretaker/warden and his family.

In the 1970s the building transferred from Exeter City Council ownership to Devon County Council and was run for 30 years as an adult learning centre, with activities and classes for local groups and individuals. However, with competing priorities for investment the building became

shabby, difficult to run and expensive to maintain and the community ceased to be involved in its day to day running. The community committee running the building was disbanded, rents rose and following changes to the way in which adult learning services were delivered, Devon County Council determined to sell the building for private development.

This was the final straw for us in the St David's neighbourhood community, which rallied, set up St David's Residents and Businesses Association (now the St David's Neighbourhood Partnership), campaigned vigorously to save the Centre and, following local consultation events, developed our own Community Vision and priorities for the neighbourhood - rather than having these imposed upon us by outside agencies. Our campaign to save the Centre from development - and base in it activities to address the issues we have identified above - has continued tirelessly for 12 years. In 2010 we set up a Trust, a registered charity, and began negotiations with Devon County Council about the potential for community control and ownership of the Centre.

We raised £1.4 million in grants and loans to refurbish the Centre, took over the freehold from Devon County Council in 2011 with a dowry from the county of £200,000 and began refurbishment in early 2011.

Serious structural issues that had not been previously identified were uncovered during the early stages of the refurbishment, which nearly sunk the whole project. Seeing how serious the board of the Trust were, and how committed was the local community, officers, councillors and funders got behind us with advice and additional financial support to complete the refurbishment.

In June 2012 the Centre opened. Two thirds of the Centre is leased to community groups and social enterprises and one third is available for hourly or sessional lets for meetings, classes and activities. The Centre also houses a Cafe with wifi that is open to the public as well as providing catering in the Centre.

Having re-opened the Centre under community management, the Trust turned its attention to creating a community garden in the grounds of the Centre. The garden contains the vestiges of the inspired planting from the past - a mulberry tree which is over 100 years old, a fig tree, fragrant shrubs and herbs. However, over the years it had suffered from

underinvestment, its ramps were too steep for people with mobility difficulties, there was no seating and it was generally looking overgrown – more a waste ground than a garden.

Following community consultation and with support from a local landscape architect, a design and planting scheme was drawn up, to create a garden which is now a quiet green space for relaxation and reflection. Exeter City Council, Devon County Council, Awards for All, The People's Health Trust and Spectrum Housing contributed funds and work was completed on the landscaping and most of the planting in April 2013. With a private donation from Michael Morpurgo whose charity Farms for City Children is based in the Centre, a 'Storytelling Chair' was carved from oak by local carver James Bond. This was installed in the Centre garden in June 2014 with a Story Telling ceremony with Michael Morpurgo and local school children.

As a private residence, as a School, a Learning Centre and as a community hub, Exeter Community Centre has been an asset at the heart of the St David's community. The Trust is determined that it will remain so.



