**Northernhay street**

Northernhay Street runs alongside the historic Exeter City wall. It is a picturesque street tucked away in the heart of Exeter and has a diverse range of architectural styles. Historically, religious, charitable and public buildings have clustered near the top of the street, while residential houses stretch downwards to the original site of the old North Gate entrance to the city. The city wall, dating from the Roman period (2nd Century AD) onwards, forms the garden back wall of properties on the East side of the street.

**Fact 1:**

The name ‘Northernhay Street’ is unique in all of Great Britain (Streetlist, 2021). “Northernhay” simply means an enclosure to the North of the city and according to Hooker, first appears in the historical record around 1415 (Historic England, 2018). Maps from 1792 to the mid-1850’s show the earlier name of Northernhay Row(Oliver et. al., 2019). Originally a trackway (then later a road), it led from the city’s North Gate to Northernhay Gardens, a public walk since 1612. Queen Street, at the top of Northernhay Street, wasn’t extended until 1840 when it cut through the ancient city wall (Greenaway, 1981). It’s likely that the name change to Northernhay Street took place when it became an important thoroughfare.

**Fact 2:**

There are 11 listed buildings, and 3 further buildings of local historic interest in this street (Exeter City Council, 2012).

No.s 2-7 form a consecutive group of “probably early C18 houses with hipped gables, later stucco and C19 sash windows” (Historic England, 2002). No.s 4 and 5 belonged to St Anne’s Well Brewery in the late 1880’s (Brewery History, 2020), as did all eight of the houses in Northernhay Square. These were rented to brewery workers until brewery closed in 1966 (Greenaway, 1981) and the tenants were able to buy their homes.

No. 13, Padrae Cottage, a substantial u-shaped building also belonged to the brewery during this time. A gateway leading into the courtyard and stables can still be seen from Northernhay Street and brewery horses would have been stabled here, as well as in the other two brewery owned stables in the street.

**Fact 3:**

Northernhay Street’s location, abutting the outer city walls meant the whole street was razed as part of the civil war improvement of defences during the 17th century and a great defensive ditch was dug immediately outside of the city wall. No buildings earlier than the mid-1650s are thought to have survived (Parker, 2021).

Detailed records exist of the city funds used to repair the wall and spending, as expected, reached new heights during the 17th century. Archaeological work in the 1990s revealed what is thought to be a Purbeck datestone recording these efforts in the wall behind Nos. 46-48. Alas, no inscription or date survives but the archaeology report mentions that the Receivers account book 1643-44 details payments for a datestone, including oil and colours for its painting and lead for the inscription. The investigation also identified gun or musket loops in the wall (Blaylock, 1992).

Ichabod Fairlove’s 1709 map of Exeter (Oliver et al, 2019) shows extensive buildings along what is now Northernhay Street, when the defensive ditches had been filled in and land sold for properties.

**Fact 4:**

A new City Prison “pleasantly situated without the walls, at the junction of Queen street and Northernhay street” was erected in 1819, on the current site of the Thistle Hotel. It consisted of “the debtors' ward, the felons prison, and the bridewell, or house of correction; and comprises 36 cells, 7 wards, 8 day-rooms, and 6 airing yards, all enclosed by a lofty outer wall” (Municipal Corporation, 1850). It replaced the city prison at South Gate, considered by one John Howard as “one of the most unwholesome and most dismal places of confinement he had ever seen” (Oliver, 1861). George Oliver recalls “We heartily rejoiced at witnessing the keystone over the archway let in and drop in its place towards the bottom of Northernhay in 1818. Thank God !”

**Fact 5:**

John W. Easton and Sons had their stonemason business on this street for over 80 years. All that remains now is the impressive Grade II listed former family home (No. 42) and the (also listed) marble-topped pillars, now flanking the entrance to the city car park. Easton’s owned several local quarries and were responsible for the stonework of some of Exeter’s finest monuments. They used locally quarried Devon Stone to create the base of the Grade II\* war memorial in Northernhay Gardens (Historic England, 2016) and the base of the clock tower on Queen Street.

Tragedy struck the family when the 15-year-old son (Alfred Easton) died due to a gunpowder explosion while creating rockets in the basement of number 42 Northernhay Street with his friend. The gunpowder they were using caught alight from a candle, causing an explosion that was heard across the street. John Short, a neighbour, rescued both boys “but they could give no information as to the explosion. They were both very badly burnt, their clothes being on fire” (Trewman’s Exeter Flying Post, 1875) and Alfred subsequently died from lock-jaw a few days later, caused by his extensive burns, and was buried in St David’s churchyard (St David’s Church List of the Recorded Memorials).

About 15 years ago, I attended an Exeter City Red Coat tour that included a visit to Northernhay Street. We were told of a walled-up body discovered in one of the walls surrounding the municipal Northernhay Street car park during building works (formerly the site of Easton’s marble works). Unfortunately, evidence of the origin of this story has not yet been identified and disappointingly this tale may be nothing more than an urban myth.

**Fact 6:**

In May 1898, a new Turkish bathhouse opened at the top of the street, on the former site of Atwills Alms-house. “The baths comprise three hot chambers; shampooing-room, with the latest improvements in shower, douche, needle etc, &c., baths abundantly served with hot and cold water, a plunge bath; capricious cooling room &C.” (Exeter and Plymouth Gazette, 1898) A news report reported on the grand opening, which was attended by Exeter’s most prominent citizens.

“[The directors] thought they would be creating a property which would be very beneficial to the immediate neighbourhood. There was an old adage which said that cleanliness was next to Godliness, and the directors thought that if they put the baths opposite a chapel, (the Bible Christians in Northernhay Street), they would not be going very far wrong (Laughter and applause)” (Exeter & Plymouth Gazette, 1898).

Unfortunately, this light-heartedness to the issue was in short-lived. The chapel lawsuit on the loss of light caused by the new building put off investors. The company struggled financially for the next 10 years or so and was finally was dissolved in 1909. (National Archives: Company No: 49831; Devon and Exeter Turkish Bath Company Ltd.)