

City and County Museum, Lincoln

Information Sheet

Archaeology Series No. 26

NORMAN BUILDINGS IN LINCOLN

INTRODUCTION



A reconstruction drawing of St. Mary's Guildhall, High St. showing how it might have looked in its original form. (D. Vale)

Lincoln is famous for its wealth of ancient houses, and especially for its Norman houses and halls, of which it has the richest collection in Britain. This is not surprising as Lincoln was in Norman times one of the richest cities in the country. Most famous are The Jew's House in The Strait, and the so-called Aaron the Jew's House in the Steep Hill, while to the south of the city centre in Wigford stands St. Mary's Guildhall. All of these date from the period 1170-1200 A.D.

Why does so much survive after eight centuries? Until this century none of the buildings was protected by law; indeed some were used for a variety of strange purposes. St. Mary's Guildhall was a brewery and the Jew's House a hostel in Victorian times. There is

probably no simple reason for survival, but the fact that they were solidly built in stone no doubt helped. They would have been expensive to demolish and furthermore in the later Middle Ages Lincoln went into a long period of stagnation, with little cause for rebuilding. But chance played a major part, and some buildings were not so fortunate. St. Andrew's Hall in Wigford was a casualty of the late 18th century, while other more fragmentary Norman remains near St. Benedict's church did not outlive the 19th century.

Three of the Dean and Chapter's houses in James Street are Norman in origin, but the wealth of the Cathedral and changing needs for accommodation led to remodelling. One of the most important new discoveries, through archaeological excavations, is that stone buildings of this type were quite common in Lincoln, and traces of them have been found by the Lincoln Archaeological Trust in Flaxengate, Steep Hill, Danes Terrace, and Swan Street.



An 18th century drawing of the now vanished St. Andrew's Hall in Wigford by Moses Griffith. (Usher Gallery)

St. Mary's Guildhall and St. Andrew's Hall both probably started out as meeting places for trade or religious guilds. Wigford, the suburb in which they stood, contained some of Lincoln's richest and most influential citizens and no doubt the building and position of these halls owed much to them.

In about 1230 the citizens gave their guildhall to the newly arrived Greyfriars, who soon rebuilt it. Presumably the original building too was a Norman guildhall like St. Mary's.

Connections with Jewish owners cannot be proved, despite the modern names of two of the houses. The Jews undoubtedly formed an important and wealthy community in 12th century Lincoln, but there was no ghetto as such and their property was wide-spread.

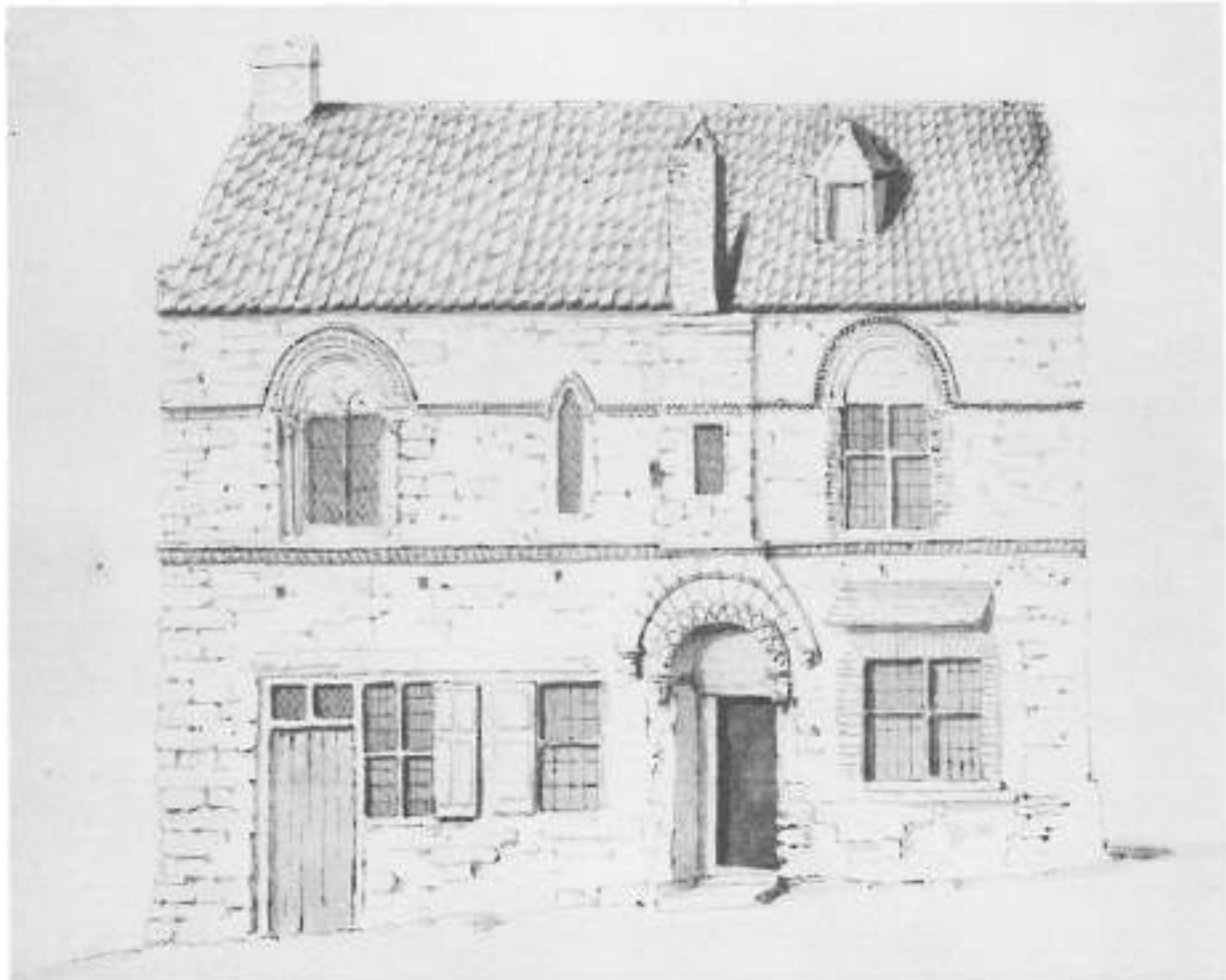
Work on the Cathedral during the 12th century would have ensured a good supply of trained masons. There are a number of connections between workmanship on the three principal Norman buildings and parts of the Cathedral. Perhaps the many lost Norman churches of the city, like the lost houses, would have served to show the skill and style of the builders. Though much remains, much has been lost, totally without record. Daniel

Defoe, writing in 1724 describes Lincoln thus:

"... Lincoln is an ancient, ragged, decayed, and still decaying city; it is so full of the ruins of monasteries and religious houses, that, in short, the very barns, stables, out-houses and as they showed me some of the very hog-sties were built church-fashion; that is to say with stone walls and arched windows and doors ..."

THE SURVIVING BUILDINGS

The **JEW'S HOUSE** (15, The Strait) is probably the best known of all surviving Norman Houses in Lincoln. Today it houses a restaurant and antique dealer's shop.



A late 18th century drawing by H. Grimm of the Jew's House in the Strait, showing some features which have now disappeared. (Usher Gallery)

Exterior: the east side, or street frontage, retains a number of the original Norman features, although later additions are also visible. The elaborate ground-floor entrance is mainly of Norman date, with its leafy decorated **capitals** (the **jamb-shafts** are now gone) supporting a semicircular arch richly carved with an interlaced pattern. There are also remains of some zig-zag ornament which flanked the jamb-shafts. The **hood-mould** of the arch supports a shallow buttress containing the chimney of a fireplace which would have served the main first-floor room. This would originally have risen above the roof height. The **tympanum**, or semicircular panel above the door, is a modern addition.

The hood-moulds of both first-floor windows survive, and are continued across the face of the building as a **string-course**. The southernmost window also retains much of its original design, although the centre-shaft which would have divided the window has been

removed to make way for a modern sash. A second string-course runs along the building at the level of the sills.



A more recent view of the Jew's House, showing the changes since Grimm's earlier sketch.

Interior: There is little to be seen inside the building beyond three plain doorways. The modern brick entrance passage does suggest earlier wooden partitions, and one of the doorways appears to have let on to an annexe, of either stone or wood.

JEW'S COURT adjoins the Jew's House to the north, and now houses Lincolnshire and Humberside Arts' Regional Craft Centre. It is a later building than its neighbour, as the east door of the Jew's House was blocked when it was built. The precise date is still a problem.

Exterior: the cellar and the east wall appear to be the earliest portions of the building, which also shows many later additions. These include Tudor windows and 20th century partitions. There seems to be no specifically Jewish or Norman connection with this building, except by tradition.

'AARON THE JEW'S HOUSE' (47, Steep Hill) stands on the corner of Steep Hill and Christ's Hospital Terrace. The architectural evidence suggests a date of A.D. 1170-80. This would seem to fit well with the traditional ownership of Aaron the Jew, who lived in Lincoln C. A.D. 1166-1186, and after whom the house has been named. However, there is no real proof of connection between the documented 'Aaron' and this Norman building. Aaron was immensely rich and owned property in many parts of the country. When he died a new government department was formed to cope with his vast property.

Exterior: The main doorway, on the ground floor, has a round-headed arch, the inner face of which is constructed of **joggled blocks**. The hood-mould of the arch is itself plain, but has terminals in the form of grotesque animals heads. Above, and supported by this originally, was a chimney buttress — similar to that at the Jew's House.



A general view of Aaron the Jew's House 47, Steep Hill.

An unusual feature which can be seen at both these houses is the centrally placed ground-floor main entrance.

On the first floor, to the right of the doorway, there can be seen a reset and restored Norman window. This was discovered in pieces in a ground-floor recess during general restoration work in 1878. The dividing centre shaft can be clearly seen, a feature which is missing on the Jew's House further down the hill. Rolls and hollows are also visible in the arch, although the design lacks the detail of the more highly decorated Jew's



Details of Aaron the Jew's House showing the main entrance, reconstructed first floor window, and the rear doorway.

House. How much of the window is original is uncertain, but the lack of weathering is significant. The south wall, in Christ's Hospital Terrace, displays sash windows. However, to the right of the upper window can be seen traces of a decorative string-course. This reappears on the west only as a small section nestling behind the modern drainpipe.

Interior: Directly opposite the main entrance is another large round-headed archway, also constructed of joggled blocks. This doorway may originally have been a rear entrance, although it seems more likely that it gave onto a wooden annexe. This is further indicated by the fact that the many bolt holes still visible in the stone surround are all on the east side i.e. **outside** the door. Apart from a slight continuation of the Christ's Hospital Terrace wall beyond that containing the rear door there are no other known Norman stone remains to the rear. It is true that the walls may have been demolished and robbed, but more likely that the bulk of any building to the rear was constructed of wood.

At first floor level, corbels can be seen projecting from the rear wall, just below the roof. It may be that the original plan of the house called for a stone extension, which was never completed, or that a timber outshut was suspended from the corbels. The actual thickness of the walls (4ft/1.2m) can be appreciated best at this rear entrance.

A modern entrance to the south, in Christ's Hospital Terrace, leads into a fine **barrel vaulted** cellar. There is also another entrance to this cellar. It consists of a narrow, steep, winding staircase leading down from a point originally just outside the back door of the stone house.



A late 18th century drawing of St. Mary's Guildhall, by H. Grimm.

(Usher Gallery)

ST. MARY'S GUILDHALL lies on the east side of the High Street, to the south of the city centre. It is often referred to as 'John O'Gaunt's Stables' probably because of a presumed connection with 'John O'Gaunt's Palace', a famous medieval building which was formerly situated on the opposite side of the street.

It was last used as a timber merchant's yard, but a period of disuse followed by plans for renovation provided both the impetus and opportunity for a detailed investigation of the building.

The west range of the complex (which fronts the present High Street) has long been acknowledged as one of the finest examples of later twelfth century secular architecture. The earliest section dates from 1170-80 A.D. The most spectacular feature of the west range is probably the large arched doorway. This stands some 16' (4.9m) high by 14' (4.3m) across.

Above can be seen an ornate string-course carved with scrolls, plant designs and fantastic beasts, giving some idea of the superb quality and high status of the original building. To the north of the main gateway can be seen an original Norman loop window, wider on the inside than the out.



This late 19th century photograph of St. Mary's Guildhall illustrates the modification of the chimney buttress since the time of Grimm.

Originally the building was higher; the upper part of the wall was partially demolished when it was re-roofed, sometime in the seventeenth century. Towards the northern end of the west range, it is possible to make out a blocked feature on the ground floor. During the investigation of the building, this was revealed as another original Norman entrance, which was altered soon after its construction, a window being inserted into the partially blocked embrasure.

Interior: Two original fireplaces were also discovered, one on the ground floor and the other above it in the great hall which occupied most of the first floor. Both display arches of joggled blocks. Remnants of arcading are also visible at first floor level; the halves of two wide semi-circular arches remain, supported by an elaborate capital. There are also traces of an internal string-course on the west wall and the bases of window shafts are visible.

On the ground floor, in the north-eastern corner of the west range, the well for a spiral staircase, leading to the 'top table' of the first floor Hall, was also discovered during the investigation.

The northern wall of the range, and small sections of the others are of original Norman date, but to the south of the main gateway, little original work survives.

Another range stretches back eastwards from the street frontage, and this contains a building referred to as the 'Norman House'. Most of its northern wall is original Norman

stonework, but the majority of the remaining building appears to be of a much later date copying the Norman style.



This photograph of the same date illustrates the courtyard behind the street frontage.



Drawing by H. Grimm showing the so called 'Norman House' situated behind the Guildhall.

Excavation work here has found evidence to suggest that the original Norman plan did extend into this range, but that it was later altered to produce the current plan.

The buildings described above are the best preserved examples of Norman architecture surviving in Lincoln today. There are other fragmentary remains to be found elsewhere in the city. These are all in the Cathedral area and would have been inhabited by Cathedral dignitaries. The major sites are described below.



Danes Terrace, Lincoln during excavation. The stone footings of medieval houses can be clearly seen.

DELORAINÉ COURT is situated in James Street, and although much modernized in the last century or two, still retains features of interest.

In the West range, a storage basement contains three Norman columns. The length of the room together with these surviving columns suggests an original plan containing some six bays. The columns have simple scalloped capitals and date from the twelfth century, possibly the first half.

Although outwardly showing seventeenth century and later features the house also incorporates sections of thick walling which have been dated to the Norman period.

GREESTONE HOUSE is situated at the top of Greestone Steps, not far from the Cathedral. Standing at the rear of the large garden is a summer-house or 'folly'. This is a most interesting piece of architecture which presents a rather bizarre mixture of styles. Of the various elements of re-used masonry, the Norman doorway is perhaps the most impressive. The round-headed arch displays two rows of chevron ornament, and this is capped by a scrolled beading which terminates in two rather weathered heads.

Norman remains also exist at the following addresses:

COTTESFORD PLACE is situated in James Street. There is a window in the Chantry at the north end of the garden. This is probably pseudo-Norman, but may well incorporate some genuine work.

ATHERSTONE PLACE is situated in James Street. Towards the east end of the south front of this building lies a Norman doorway.

There is no doubt that many other fragmentary Norman remains still exist in buildings in the city today. Many of these are no doubt undiscovered — in cellars, behind modern walls and buried underfoot.

GLOSSARY

Barrel-vault: continuous arched vault, semi-circular in profile.

Buttress: projection from a wall for additional support.

Column: vertical support, consisting of base, shaft and capital.

Capitals: top section of a column.

Hood-mould: projecting moulding on the wall face over a window or doorway, either following the shape of the arch, or square in outline.

Jamb-shafts: pillars at the side of doors, windows, fireplaces, etc.

Joggled-blocks: stepping of adjoining stones forming an archway to prevent slipping.

String-course: projecting horizontal band, usually moulded.

Tympanum: semi-circular solid space between the arch and lintel of a doorway, or between the covering arch and lights of a window.

OTHER NORMAN BUILDINGS As well as the houses and guildhalls there are two other spectacular buildings in Lincoln with important Norman remains; the Cathedral and the Castle.

At the Cathedral look at the lower part of the West Front. The elaborately carved shafts around the door-openings and the sculptured scenes from the Old and New Testaments were added in Bishop Alexander's time (1123-48), but behind these can be seen the tall plain recesses and the bases of the western tower begun by Bishop Remigius in about 1075.

The new styles and the high quality work of the Cathedral masons must have had great influences on the builders of private houses at the time. Much Norman work is to be seen at the Castle. The vault of the eastern gatehouse, the western gatehouse, the Lucy Tower and the base of the Observatory Tower all belong to the late 12th century, while some stretches of wall still show the curious Norman 'herring-bone' masonry. The Castle was begun in 1068, but in its early stages was probably fortified with timber and earth; it is possible that the gatehouses were in stone from the beginning, however.

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Map showing location of Norman Buildings in Lincoln.

LINC^{OLN}SHIRE COUNTY COUNCIL

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