



# THE HISTORY OF BRADNINCH PLACE

*THE HISTORY OF BRADNINCH PLACE***50 AD**

The Romans occupied the city from 50 AD, following a siege by Vespasian. The site of Bradninch Place is outside the boundary of the earlier Roman legionary fortress but is within the City's second century Roman walls and is likely to have been occupied.

A number of Roman finds have been made in the area, including 19 Roman coins during the 1909 construction works, four dating from the first century military phase of occupation (during the reigns of the emperors Claudius and Nero).

The grassy bank behind the museum is known to have a Roman quarry beneath it.

**1086**

Rougemont Castle was built by William the Conqueror following a siege and local rebellion against the new king. The castle on the red hill was built on a volcanic outcrop nestled in the north east corner of the old Roman city walls. Its moat is still very visible today in Rougemont Gardens and the outer ramparts extended down and out to where the Phoenix and Central Library are now.

The outer ditch lay across what is now Gandy Street and the back of the museum. Together they formed a fortified quadrant in the highest part of the city.

The ring of land between the castle wall and the edge of the outer ditch became known as the Bradninch Precinct, an extra-parochial parish in the city, as it was held by the crown as part of the Duchy of Cornwall (along with the village of Bradninch) until the 19th century. Prince Charles, as the present Duke of Cornwall, remains the nominal lord of the manor of Bradninch and continues to own some land within the precinct.

The name of Bradninch is derived from the Celtic for 'broad or spreading ash'.

*THE HISTORY OF BRADNINCH PLACE***1086**

The annexe to the Phoenix sits on a spur of land containing some of the final, unexcavated remnants of the rampart of the outer bailey of the castle. Generally, very little remains of the outer ramparts but this small area is largely untouched. It was never cut away and could even contain Roman remains. It was part of an encroachment from another parish into the castle property and was used as a walled garden, mostly under the ownership of the tenant of Rougemont House (now the Mathematics School).

# 1600s



The outer ditch of the castle had been infilled in the late 1100s and by the early 17th century development was allowed on the now more accessible outer ramparts.

The Duchy adopted a policy of enhancing its income by leasing off its outermost properties, mostly as gardens, but here a terrace of houses was built immediately by a **Mr Manwaring**. No doubt the position was chosen carefully to provide residents with a view - it being on the rampart slopes - and also to avoid the unstable land of the infilled ditch in front.

The houses varied in number - in 1650 they were referred to as 'sixe severall tenements in very good repair with gardens unto them belonging'. By the early 18th century eight houses had been built of various shapes and sizes, enlarged and rebuilt following damage incurred during the Civil War sieges of the city. The terrace was originally called **Castle Close** but later became known as **Bradninch Place**.

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**1700s**

The Bradninch Place houses formed a heterogenous collection of architectural styles - although often generally labelled as Queen Anne -

but were large with five or more bedrooms and considered upmarket.

They housed such local notables as the city mayor of 1691 and MP 1695-8, wealthy merchant Sir Edward Seaward, who gifted Bury Meadow and the land for Hele's School to the poor of the city.

**1800s**

The commodious accommodation provided by the large houses in the terrace readily leant itself to commercial use - for piano teaching and singing classes; boarding and day schools for girls; including the **Misses Linford's Establishment for Young Ladies**,

whose curriculum included Preparatory Classes on the Pestalozzian Method (a whole-child approach emphasising the development of all aspects of a person, including the head, heart and hands).

The social demographic of residents was changing - whereas in 1830 five of the household heads were classed as Gentry or Nobility, by 1871 residents included a commercial traveller, ironmonger, oil merchant and a railway official, with only one being of independent means.

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**1870s**

Two recently started schools, the School of Art and School of Science, were installed into the new Royal Albert Memorial Museum. With backing from the University of Cambridge, the schools combined in 1893 as the **Exeter Technical and University Extension College** and then became the **Royal Albert Memorial College** in 1900, under the control of the city council's Education Committee.

**1890**

Meanwhile, by 1890 the Bradninch Place houses were described as being in a 'considerable extent of decay', with tenants and buyers proving hard to find.

In their final years the buildings tended to have more institutional occupiers such as a **Dr Barnado's** home (no. 3) and a **Liberal Club**.



*THE HISTORY OF BRADNINCH PLACE***1904**

By the turn of the new century a jumble of buildings across the city centre was being utilised for further education teaching and consolidation was required. A frustration grew with the lack of suitable space and numerous plans began to be hatched but the city's ambition was thwarted by both the lack of sites and of sufficient funding.

First off the blocks was the York Wing of the museum (completed in 1899) but within a couple of years more space was needed and an extension to the rear was planned. A foundation stone was even laid for it in 1902 but the building was never actually completed (the stone is still visible set into the Rougemont Gardens boundary wall).

Meanwhile, seeking new residential accommodation for college students, one of the houses in Bradninch Place, Bradninch House, was bought to accommodate 20 scholars. Soon the whole terrace, plus two properties in Gandy Street, had been acquired, initially for use by the college as they were.



*THE HISTORY OF BRADNINCH PLACE***1904**

Desperate for more space, more schemes emerged - an early plan was to build a new college building on land at right angles to Bradninch Hall (see below).

Another idea was to put a new building up against the city wall behind the museum and nos 7 & 8 Bradninch Place were quickly demolished in 1904 to begin the process (ironically this part of the site was never actually built on). However, thoughts turned to a more ambitious project and over the next few years the rest of the old houses were demolished as plans were soon drawn up for a much larger building.

**1909**

The new building was for a combined expansion of the Royal Albert Memorial College with a Day Training College for teachers (particularly for women, who were excluded from the only other teacher training college, St Lukes). The national Board of Education was pleased to reward this larger ambition by providing funding to the tune of £15,000. In 1909 a large slot was cut into the old castle ramparts to provide a flat building plot on the site of 1- 4 Bradninch Place. This position allowed for a grander entrance from Gandy Street.

The architects were local - Tait & Harvey of Bampfylde House - who had also designed the museum's York Wing.

The new Portland stone and red brick building was more in the Georgian style than the standard traditional Gothic of the time - 'Edwardian Baroque' with 'a busy brick and stone baroque front'. The building's construction used the latest technology - concrete, steel beams and proprietary pre-cast hollow blocks made by the Kleine Flooring Company.

The foundation stone was laid in November 1909 (see above). The new building assumed the name of the old terrace and was opened on October 20th 1911.

It had more than 20,000 square feet of floor space, over 40 rooms and included a raked, two storey lecture theatre for 60 (now the main art gallery) and a botanical laboratory. It was hoped that the adjoining space to the north could become the site of a great hall but only huts were ever erected there.

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**1909**

There were three entrances, one at the front for general visitors and two to the side - one for the Day Training College, which occupied the rear of the building, and one for what was now being called the **University College** at the front.

Student accommodation was hostel-style in **Bradninch Hall**, around the corner in Castle Street. Initially for twenty female students, the building was later renovated and new wings added to raise the number of students to 78. The rules were strict; doors closed at 7pm and special permission was needed if they wanted to stay out until 9pm.

The students also had a rigorous religious routine with morning prayer, three collects and then prayers and grace in the evening. The students apparently accepted this regime *'uncomplainingly, the only protest was mild banter in the Students' magazine'*.

Although the new building allowed student numbers to increase to over 300 no more than four students a year were studying for academic degrees - the vast majority were there for teacher training and scientific and vocational studies such as engineering.

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**1915**



The war effort required the property of the college.  
Part of the main building on Gandy Street housed the staff for  
a local recruiting drive.

Bradninch Hall became a military hospital.

# 1920s



Participants in RAG Week in the 1920s.

Student numbers grew quickly after the First World War, with 350 admitted in 1920 and new departments added, such as Pharmacy.

The intention was to achieve full, independent university status but the Board of Education had other priorities and would only sanction an affiliation with London University.

In 1922 the college was officially renamed the **University College of the South West**, serving the whole of the south west beyond Bristol.



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**1929**

From the late 1920s the Streatham campus to the north of the city centre started to be developed to house the university, enabling another move and heralding decades of steady growth. It received its charter as the **University of Exeter** in 1955. Bradninch Place, however, was retained as a university building.

Members of the 'Borough of Bradninch' pictured below in a very familiar location.



**1930s**

More scholars and tutors in 1933.

By 1937 with the university well established on its new campus thoughts turned to re-purposing Bradninch Place. One idea was to turn it into a new civic centre for the council's offices (rejected in favour of a new building on the site of the current Guildhall Centre). Another was to turn it into a Technical College serving the whole county. Neither scheme proceeded.



**1942**

*'We have chosen as targets the most beautiful places in England. Exeter was a jewel. We have destroyed it.'*

So announced the German radio stations on May 4th 1942.

A total of 74 incendiary bombs were dropped in this small part of the city centre on the night of the Exeter Blitz, destroying all the neighbouring buildings to the east and south east.

Two outbuildings were completely destroyed - the Registry, home to most of the college records and a handicrafts hut on the site of the current Studio 74. The latter was replaced by the present day single storey building. The main building caught fire in two places but luckily a professor was able to persuade firefighters to give up a lost cause nearby and concentrate their efforts on his building and the blaze was then contained. The rest of Gandy Street survived largely intact.

The City Council commissioned an eminent town planning consultant, Thomas Sharp, to prepare a redevelopment plan for the post war reconstruction of the city. The plan was published as the book Exeter Phoenix.

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**1949**



**RAG group in the first year of commercial Rag Mag.  
Amongst this group is a student who later became an MP.**

*THE HISTORY OF BRADNINCH PLACE***1951**

The museum was still being used for university and art school purposes but in 1948 a 'modern' school of art was formed as the **Exeter School of Art**.

It was renamed in 1951 as the **Exeter Central College of Art** and moved into neighbouring 21 - 22 Gandy Street (now Zizzi's).

It remained until 1959 when, now as the **Exeter College of Art & Design**, it largely moved to new premises in Earl Richards Road North, off Topsham Road.

The Graphics department remained in Gandy Street until 1984 before relocating to the main site. So for over 30 years, despite the expanding campus up on the hill, Gandy Street remained a key centre for further education in the city centre.

**1958**

With the completion of the new Queens Building on campus more departments were able to move up the hill, including the Arts Faculty and Mathematics.



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**1960**

By the 1960's the building housed the Law department, Psychology, and the Extra-Mural Studies department (the latter being the last to leave in the 80's).

The annexe housed an Institute of Education and huts on the land to the rear of the museum were also used.

For a short time neighbouring Argyle House (next to Zizzi's) also became a university building.

*THE HISTORY OF BRADNINCH PLACE***1984**

Exeter City Council, the Arts Council and Devon County Council between them bought the building from the university to create the Exeter and Devon Arts Centre, operated by an independent charity. The former university café in the rear annexe became the 80 capacity Cafe Theatre for music, theatre and comedy.

Former lecture rooms became studios for workshops and classes and other facilities included a recording studio in what is now Studio 74, a photographic darkroom and the regional agency South West Jazz

(Do you recognise any of the staff pictured?).

*THE HISTORY OF BRADNINCH PLACE***1997**

With the help of one of the early National Lottery grants the auditorium, backstage, kitchen and café bar areas as we know them today were constructed/re-modelled and the main building was permanently linked to the 1940's annexe.

The architects were Kensington Taylor (who also designed Sandy Park and new football stadium grandstands for both Torquay United and Exeter City).

Look out for notable artworks by local artists inside and outside the building - The Sun and the Moon stained glass window was commissioned from St Ives painter Terry Frost; the Unicorn statue by Simon Ruscoe and the Phoenix bird above the entrance created by Will Jackson.

The organisation changed its name and the building re-opened in February 1999 as Exeter Phoenix.

**2008-18**

More additions and improvements were made to the building - beginning with the café bar terrace and including an auditorium balcony, a cinema (Studio 74) with projection box extension, re-vamped gallery spaces, new reception area and new toilets.

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