



DISCOVERING VICARS' CLOSE

PROGRAMME REPORT

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INTRODUCTION

Discovering Vicars' Close was a programme of activity over two weeks from 30 May to 10 June 2023. Primarily a consultation exercise, the aim was to inform visitors and the local community about the project, to seek input and ideas to inform plans, and to test content and format of a selection of events and workshops with a Vicars' Close theme.

At the heart of the project was a temporary exhibition in the front two rooms of No 12 Vicars Close. This was open each day from 10am to 4pm and welcomed over 3,100 visitors across 11 days. At the same time Vicars Close Chapel was also opened to visitors, both venues were stewarded by a team of 28 volunteers.

A supporting programme of talks, tours and workshops picked up different themes to test interest and format, thereby informing our activities planning. The programme was very well received with some events (notably the guided tours) selling out within hours.

Partnership and collaboration was central to the programme to develop content, promote and deliver activity. Staff across the Cathedral supported the programme, together with 11 external organisations/businesses and 45 volunteers.

Feedback was sought on all activities and this report summarises the findings.



AT A GLANCE...

3,109

EXHIBITION VISITORS

55

VOLUNTEERS

22

EVENTS DELIVERED

300+

HOURS OF VOLUNTEER
TIME

742

SURVEYS COMPLETED*

172

PARTICIPANTS IN FAMILY
WORKSHOPS

99%

of attendees would
recommend events to
friends

9/10

average rating for
events

* TOTAL FOR PROJECT



PROGRAMME OF ACTIVITY

The main event of 'Discovering Vicars' Close' was the exhibition at No 12. Hosted across two downstairs rooms, the displays gave an overview of the project and a brief historical context.

Historic images were sourced from the Cathedral archive, South West Heritage Trust and Wells and Mendip Museum. Key historic artefacts were highlighted with images and information. Architectural plans and the strategic vision for interpretation were provided by B2 architects and Thread respectively. Project ecologists, Johns Associates supplied a display on bats and biodiversity.

Audiovisual content included a short introductory film on the project. This was created by Harry Steele, a young, Somerset based, start up film maker. Wells Cathedral School, Cathedral choristers and Vicars Choral helped provide content.

The film is also being used on the Cathedral website and shown as part of a Wells Community event in July. It can be viewed online:

<https://youtu.be/ZT7C5qrVDdc>

Project surveyors, Downland Partnership, created a 'fly through' of the Treasury block. This used survey data to exemplify how we might address interpretative access to physically challenging spaces in the Close.





INTERACTION AND FEEDBACK

As well as sharing information about the project, a key element of the exhibition was consultation. This was designed to be engaging and interactive through a series of questions posed to visitors:

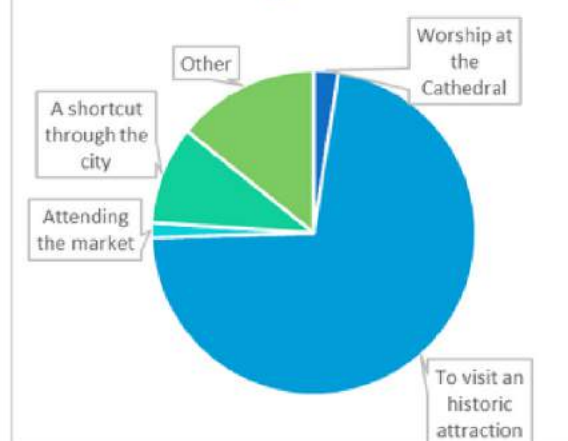
- Which word best describes Vicars' Close for you?
- What interests you?
- How does Choral Music make you feel?
- How would you like to learn more about Vicars' Close?
- Do you have an interesting fact or specific question you would like answered?

The questions mirrored the project survey which had previously been conducted face to face in the city centre and promoted online. A total of 742 survey responses were received. 205 surveys were completed during the exhibition.

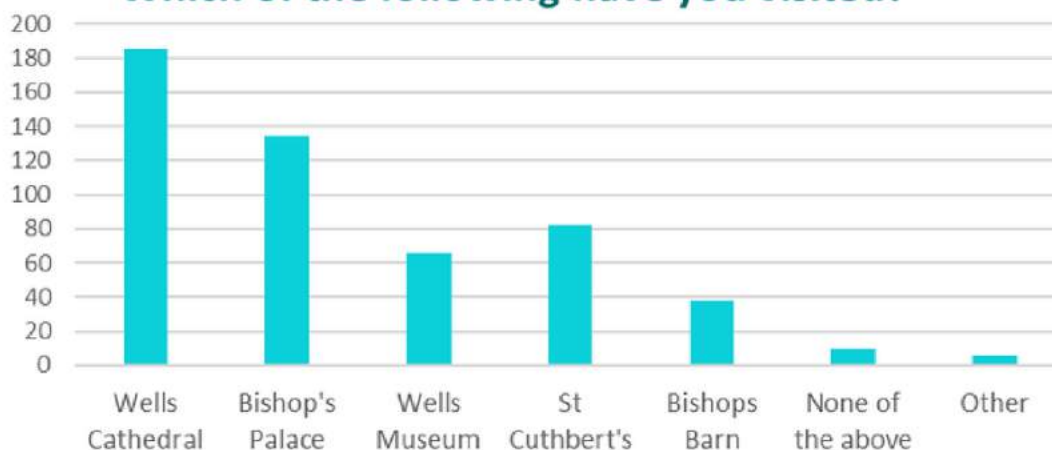
For the purposes of this report only surveys returned by visitors to the exhibition have been analysed to provide a snapshot of current visitors to Vicars' Close. Analysis of all survey responses is underway and the findings will be presented in a separate report.

53% were first time visitors to Vicars' Close

What is your main reason for visiting Vicars' Close?



Which of the following have you visited?



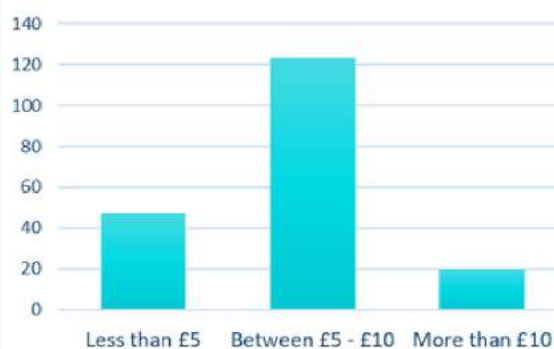
93%

would be willing to buy a ticket for a new visitor experience

84%

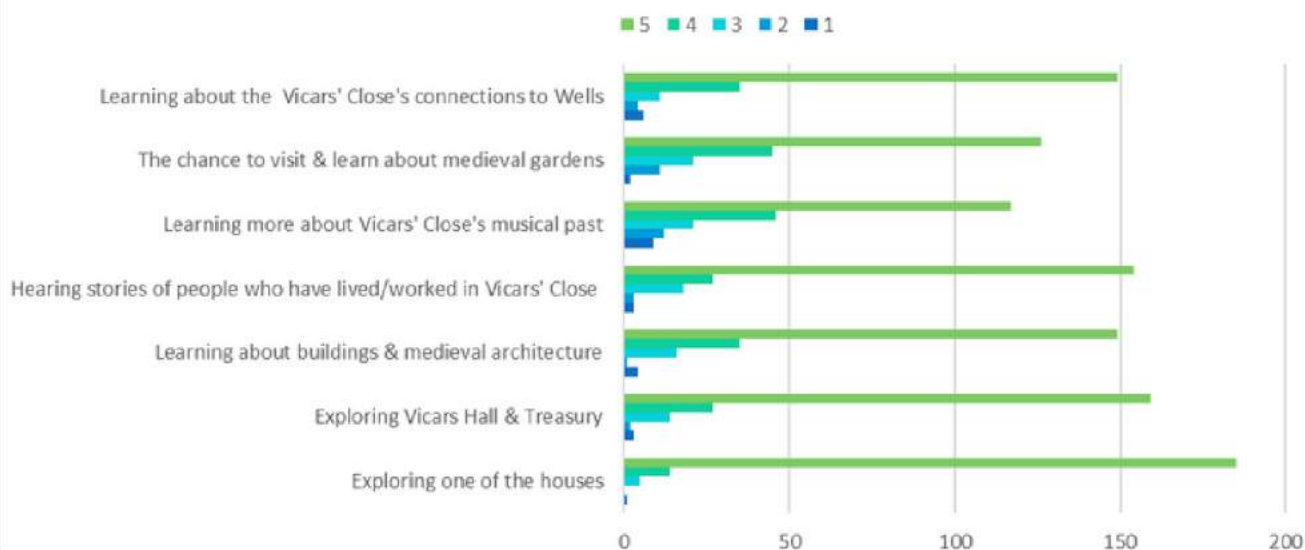
use a smart phone

How much would you be willing to pay for a ticket?

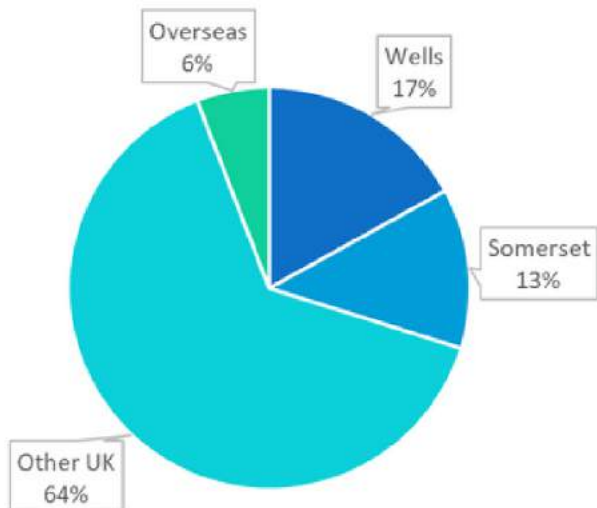


How interested would you be in the following experiences at Vicars' Close?

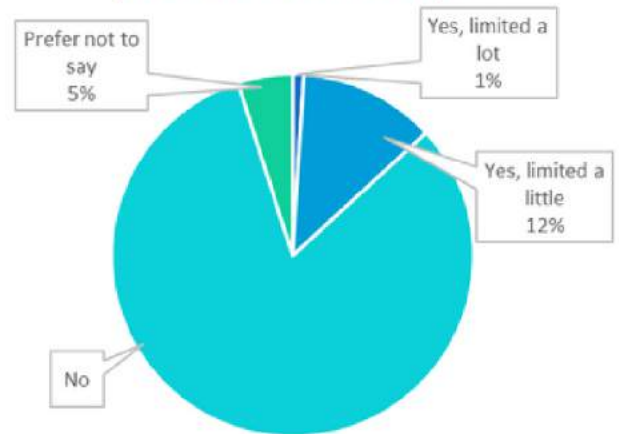
(5=very interested 1=not interested)



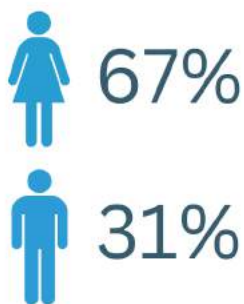
Where are you from?



Are your day to day activities limited because of a health problem or disability?



GENDER IDENTITY

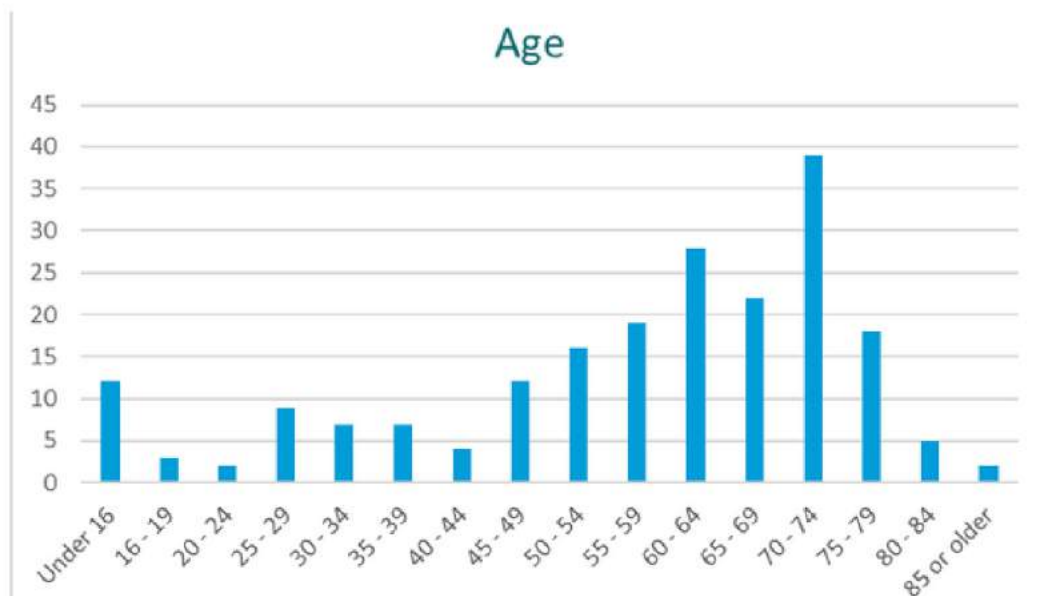


2% Prefer not to say

ETHNIC GROUP

- 90%** White British
- 6%** Other white background
- 1%** White Irish
- 1%** Asian/Asian British – Bangladeshi
- 2%** Other ethnic group

Age



How does Choral music make you feel??



"Depends on who's singing it..."

"sleepy, peaceful and relaxed"

"Like a dolphin"

"It can be fun to sing but some pieces are sooo boring"

"It uplifts my soul"

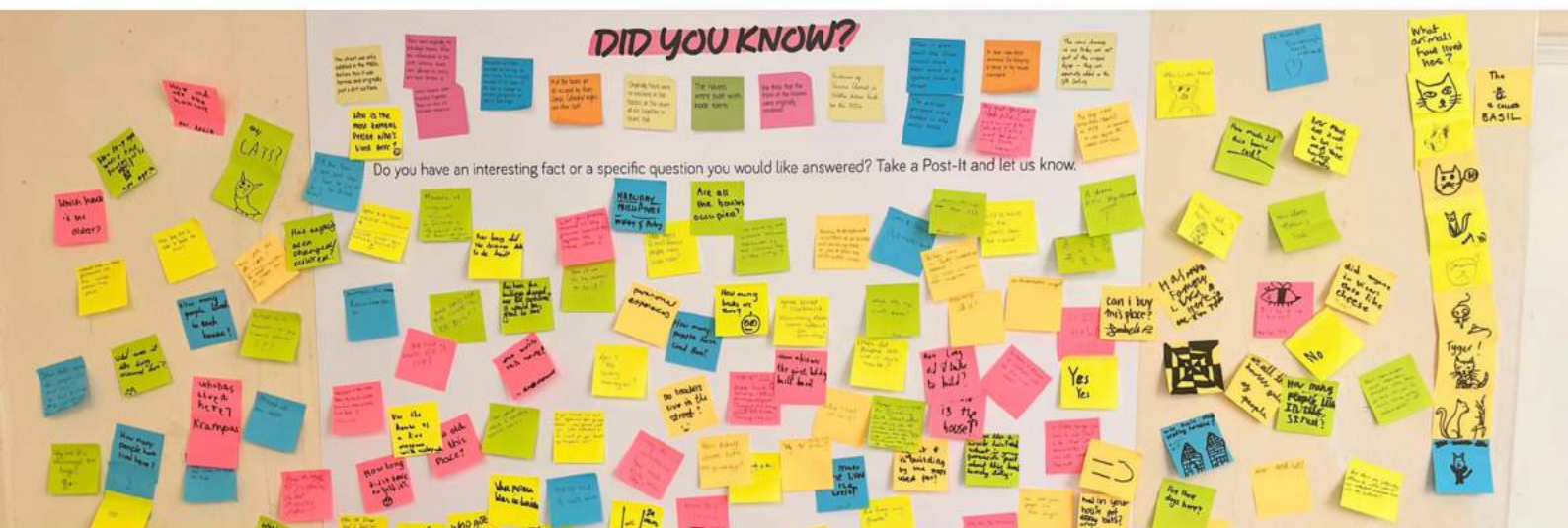
"it cured my diabetes!!!"

"A part of something so much bigger"

"connected to the past"

"annoyed, ears hurt"

"it makes me happy to be alive"



A further series of questions asked people what topics or themes interested them. There was a lot of duplication across responses and the following questions summarise the main areas. These will be used as a checklist to ensure that core interpretation provides the answers to the most common questions.

"How old are the houses?"

"Who lives here?"

"How long did it take to build the Close?"

"What were they like when they were built (decor)?"

"Why the big chimneys?"

"Are there any ghosts?"

"Did they have pets?"

"What was daily life like?"

"What type of bats live here?"

"Who owns the houses, can I rent one?"

"How did you get to live here?"

"How much did it cost to build?"

"How common were streets like this?"

"How many people lived in each house?"

"Has anyone famous lived here?"

TALKS AND TOURS

The programme of community events picked up on themes linked to Vicars' Close. Promotion and booking of all activities was supported by the Cathedral marketing and events team:

- **Talks:** Volunteer and historic gardens expert, Sarah Hare, gave a talk on Medieval gardens. Project conservation consultants presented the key findings of the project to date. Both talks were fully booked in advance (60 people each). Attendees rated the talks 4.38 and 4.58 out of 5 respectively.
- **Bat walk:** 18 people attended an evening walk along Vicars Close with Project ecologist Matt Johns. Three different types of bay were identified using bat frequency detectors. Participants rated the walk 4.67.
- **Archive tours:** Cathedral archivist Veronica Howe hosted 5 visits to the archives to see the original Vicars Choral charters and other significant items from the collection. Attendees rated the tours 4.89 out of 5.

"Excellent presentation"

Vicars' Close Revealed talk

"Definitely 5 star!"

Bat walk



"Lovely to see the original documents from the past" "Perfect!"

Archive tours

"My son is autistic and rarely leaves the house or speaks to anyone. I thought it amazing he came with me. He then felt comfortable enough to speak to the ecologist on more than one occasion. Win, win I'd say"

Bat walk

- **Hidden Spaces Tours:** A new guided tour of Vicars' Close including Vicars Hall and the Treasury Block. This was developed by a focussed group of Cathedral volunteer guides. The guides worked together to research, create and test the tours. Numbers on each tour were limited due to capacity of the spaces included. They proved to be the most popular activity in the programme with all spaces (48 across 4 tours) selling out within hours.

Evaluation of the tours is ongoing and the guides are continuing to work together as a special interest learning group. New volunteers are being trained to deliver the tour. The guides have asked if they can continue to deliver the tours every fortnight as part of the Cathedral's specialist tour offer.



"I've never seen anything like it before!"

Hidden Spaces Tour





FAMILY WORKSHOPS

The Project worked with the Cathedral education department to deliver 12 family workshop sessions grouped around four activities:

- Discover Bats:** Delivered with support of project ecologists, Johns Associates, this workshop gave an introduction to bats and where they might be found in Vicars' Close. The main craft activity was to make a bat box that the children could take home with them. These workshops were very popular with 54 children and 40 adults participating. The main suggestion for improvement was to have real bats in the room!

"It's really the best"

Discovering Bats

- Create a Coat of Arms:** Supported by research volunteers the groups had a guided walk along Vicars' Close to look at the coats of arms on the buildings. Back in the education room they then created their own Coat of Arms. 20 children and 15 adults participated. This workshop had the highest participant rating with an average score of 4.8/5.

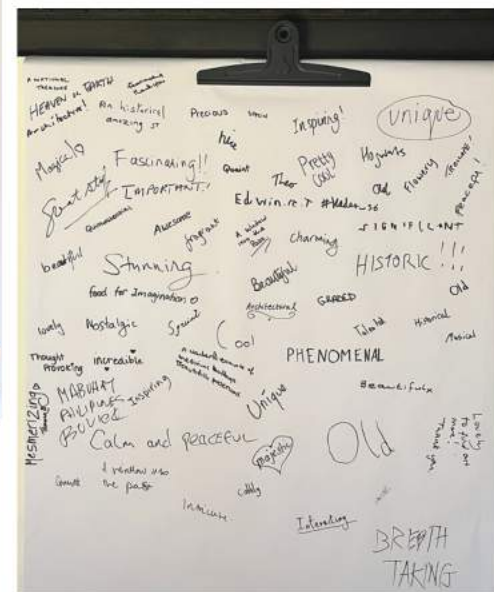
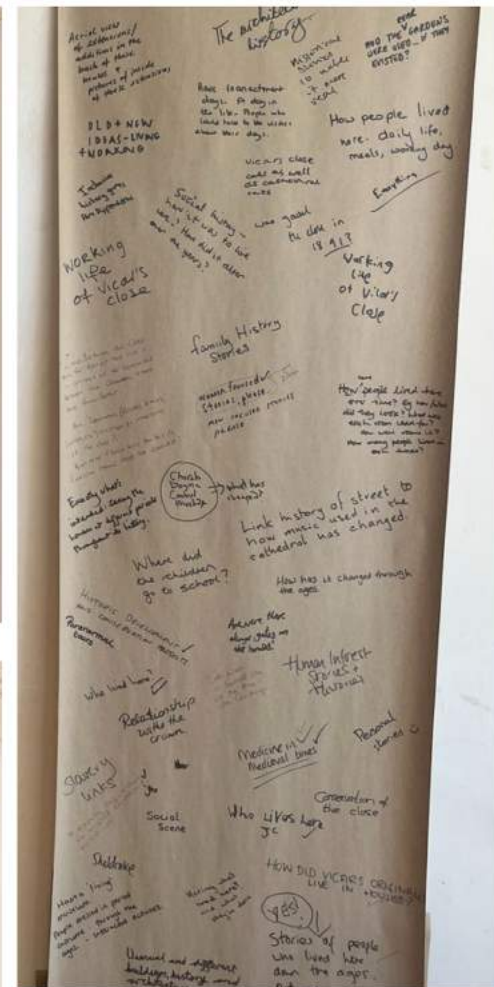
- **Chorister Experience:** Vicars' Choral outreach officer, Naomi McCloud Jones supported this workshop for 6-11 year olds. A singing workshop in the choir's rehearsal space was followed by an opportunity to try on the chorister's vestments. The session ended with a performance by the children in the quire of the Cathedral. Originally two sessions were planned but as the numbers for the afternoon workshop were low, all 15 participants were combined into a single session. 18 adults attended the end of workshop performance.

- **Family Singalong:** As the Chorister Experience was for unaccompanied children a workshop for younger children was hosted at the same time. 5 children, 5 adults and 2 babies attended.

*"It was fantastic!"
"I loved it!"*

Create a Coat of Arms





Discovering Vicars' Close

Programme of Events

Unless stated all events are free of charge but donations towards the Vicars' Close project are welcomed

Discovering Vicars' Close

Visit our temporary exhibition to learn more about this amazing place and help inform our plans for the future

Tuesday 30 May - Saturday 10 June

10am - 4pm
Closed Sundays

Half-term Family Activities

Three days of different activities with a Vicars' Close theme:

Tuesday 30 May - Create a Coat of Arms workshops

Wednesday 31 May - Discover Bats workshops

Thursday 1 June - Chorister Experience workshops

Thursday 1 June - Family Singalong workshops

Various times throughout each day - see Eventbrite for more details

There will be a small charge of £2 per child / £1 if eligible for free school meals



Treasury Block & Vicars' Close Tours **SOLD OUT**

Wednesday 31 May, 10.30am • Thursday 1 June, 2.00pm

Monday 5 June, 2.00pm • Friday 9 June, 10.30am

Led by specialist volunteer guides explore usually unseen spaces including the Vicars' Hall, Chapel and Treasury block



Bat Walk on Vicars' Close

Wednesday 7 June, 8.45pm

Join our project ecologist to explore Vicars' Close at dusk and learn more about the different species and habits of our local bats

Vicars in the Archives with Veronica Howe, Cathedral Archivist

Thursday 8 June 10.00am, 12.00 noon, 2.00pm & 3.00pm

Discover some rarely seen material from our collections including the original Royal Charter and a letter from the Court of Queen Elizabeth.

Gardens in the Medieval and Early Tudor Era

Wednesday 7 June, 10.30am

A talk by historic gardens expert, Sarah Hare. Sarah will give a broad outline of how gardens developed in the period and specifically how gardens in Vicars' Close might have been used.



Vicars' Close Revealed

SOLD OUT

Friday 2 June, 10.30am

A presentation given by our Conservation consultant Catherine Woolfitt. Come and find out more about the new discoveries made about the development of the Close over time.



For more information and to book online, please visit:
wellscathedral.eventbrite.co.uk
or drop in on the day!



EXHIBITION BOARDS

OUR PROJECT

Our Project will create a legacy that will not only safeguard the future of Vicars' Close, but also deliver an exciting, new, visitor experience and programme of events to uncover and celebrate our heritage.

This exhibition and our Discovering Vicars' Close events programme touch on some of the key themes and explain a bit more about our project.

Researching our archives

THE HERITAGE

Vicars' Close is widely described as one of the most complete medieval streetscapes in Europe. Built between 1348 and 1363, it is still used for its original purpose: to house the Cathedral's adult choir. It comprises 30 Grade I listed properties and is of international significance.



Sharing our heritage



Archival research



Restoring our buildings

Our Project will repair and conserve the envelope of the Close's buildings, to halt the water ingress and damp that is causing considerable and accelerating deterioration to the buildings' fabric. Without these urgent works there is an imminent danger that Vicars' Close is added to Historic England's 'Heritage at Risk Register.'

Two of the properties will also be opened to the public as interpretation spaces where the stories of the Close's social, architectural, and musical history and heritage will be told for the first time.



PICTURES OF THE PAST



Thank you to Wells Cathedral Archives, Wells and Mendip Museum and South West Heritage Trust for use of these images

AMAZING ARTWORKS & ARTEFACTS

Vicars' Close is home to some incredible furniture and decoration.



The interior of the Chapel was decorated by William de Burgh in the 14th century. He was the leading specialist in sigillite, an ancient technique of carving into plaster. Sadly, persistent damp damaged the artwork, which was eventually painted over.



Famous gothic revival architect William Burges applied the paint scheme to the exterior of the Chapter House and the 22 Vicars' Close in the 1860s. Burges is perhaps best known for designing Cardiff Castle.



Some of the houses have internationally significant medieval wall paintings. This painting in No 14 depicts the Tree of Jesse, dating from the 14th century. It is the only known example of a similar painting within a domestic setting. It was restored in 2015.



This large painting in the Vicars' Hall depicts two royal charters granted to the Vicars' Choir. Bishop Ralph handing the medieval Vicars their first charter, with the inscription to the lower left celebrating the charter granted by Elizabeth I. The painting is a curious hybrid of medieval and Elizabethan, with 16th-century Vicars in the upper left and others wearing Elizabethan clothes, ruffs and beards, to the right. The painting is thought to date to c1600 and to have been overpainted to update the portraits of individual vicars.



The great brass cupboard in the Vicars' Hall is believed to be part of the original furnishings and dates from 1360.



This Charter from King Edward I dates from 1268 and is kept in our Cathedral archives. It grants Ralph, Bishop of Bath and Wells, permission to give the Vicars' Choir, 'not having a common habitation', a plot of land and to hold the houses 'for their common and perpetual habitation'.



Although fragmentary and small-scale, there are significant remains of medieval glass in Vicars' Hall. Here are two examples: On the left, St Catherine with her wheel, and on the right, a portrait of a vicar wearing his mitre.



The two figures sculptures currently displayed on the east wall of the Vicars' Hall are rare survivals of medieval timber sculpture, apparently with traces of coloured decoration remaining.



The monument filing cabinet dates from c.1620. It was used to hold leases and documents of the Vicars' endowment. Each drawer is slightly different so that it only fits in its proper position.

WHAT NEXT?

We are working towards the submission of our Round 2 application to the National Lottery Heritage Fund later this year. We should know if we have been successful in March 2024.



Once all our funding is confirmed the project can begin. Following a period of detailed design, we will go out to tender for our contractors. We hope to begin physical work on site in late 2024 and anticipate that the project will take 3 - 4 years to complete.

Visit our website to keep up to date on progress: www.wells cathedral.org.uk/vicarsclose

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

Thank you for visiting this exhibition. We are looking for as much feedback as possible to help inform our project so please also complete our short survey. There are paper copies available or you can complete online using the QR code opposite.



SUPPORT US

The total project cost is estimated to be £6.2m. So far we have raised just under £1.1m with a potential £3.3m from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

We need to raise the remaining match funding of £1.8m by March 2024. If you would like to make a donation, however small, please speak to one of our volunteers or visit our JustGiving page using the QR code opposite.

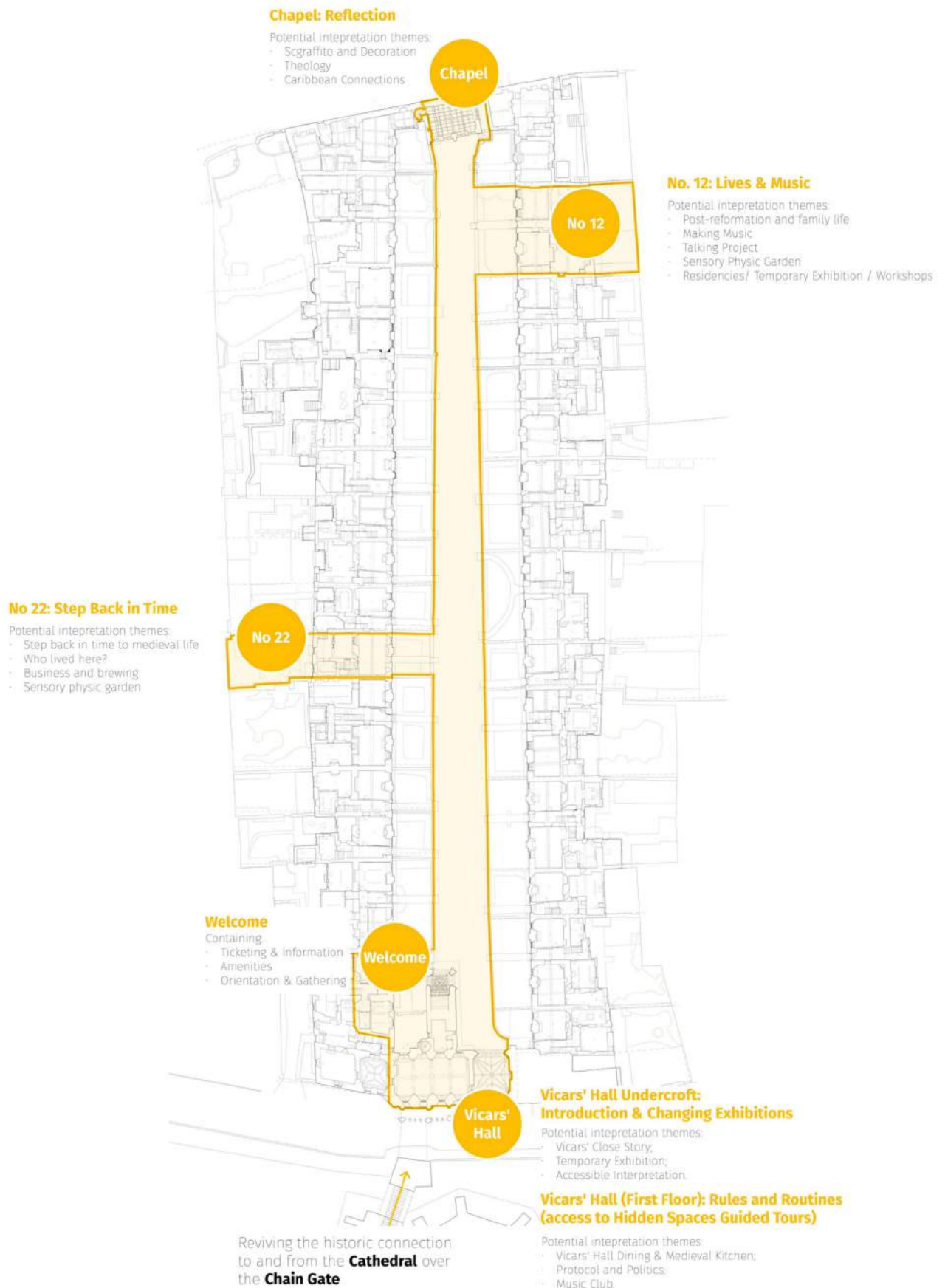


EVENTS AND ACTIVITIES

Take a look at our Discovering Vicars' Close programme to see what's on and where else you can explore.



VISITOR EXPERIENCE PLAN



THANK YOU!

Many thanks to all the following organisations and individuals
who have helped to make this exhibition, and the
Discovering Vicars' Close events, happen:



Harry Steele
Catherine Woolfitt
Sarah Hare

Clive Edney and our volunteer guides
Ross Young and the Wells Ambassadors
Ye Olde Sweet Shoppe, Wells
Kate Bridge and Jess Witchell (Learning team)
Veronica Howe (Cathedral Archives)
Debbie Simpson (Development Office)
Ruth Clacee Rowe (Volunteer Services)

Emily Bevan, David Bevan and Darren Brown (Events and Marketing)
Mark Rowe and the Cathedral works team

All of our volunteer stewards and researchers