

Bow Lane and the Medieval Vicars Choral of St Mary's Cathedral Limerick

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The history of the Vicars Choral of St Mary's Cathedral is outlined and discussed. The location of the houses where the vicars lived is suggested, as is the position of the Bow that gave its name to Bow Lane, now St. Augustine Place.

In the medieval period St Mary's was a collegiate church administered by secular clergy. The chapter was set up by Bishop Donatus O'Brien c.1205 and consisted of four major dignitaries, the Dean, Precentor, Treasurer and Archdeacon together with eight canons.¹ One of the functions of the chapter was to maintain worship within the Cathedral, but because its members were often absent on their own or church business substitutes, or vicars, were appointed in their place to ensure that Mass was said on a regular basis and these vicars formed their own college or Vicars Choral.² This college was not a training ground for higher office because, while the canons were drawn from the highest stratum of society, their vicars were drawn from lower down the social scale and so could not aspire to greater things.³

Very little is known of the history of the Limerick Vicars Choral. It is uncertain when the college was founded, but the earliest reference to them appears to be under Bishop Hubert (1223-50) when he gave the vill of Singland to the canons and vicars.⁴ In the papal taxations of 1302-7 the stipends of the vicars are valued at nothing.⁵ In 1475, at the petition of James Lang a citizen of Limerick, a papal enquiry was set in train to investigate the circumstances his excommunication following a dispute with the 'perpetual vicars in the church of Limerick'.⁶

The vicars feature regularly as beneficiaries in the extant wills of the period in return for which they were expected to say Masses for the deceased. In 1376 Martin FitzThomas Arthur left them 2 shillings; in 1380 Gillian Beofor also left 2s; in 1425 John Arthur left 6s 8d for the vicars to 'celebrate my obsequies' and in 1424 Thomas Arthur left 8s.⁷ In 1402 Thomas Balbein left 2s for the remembrance of his soul twice yearly.⁸ In 1405

¹ For discussion of the chapter, a possible earlier chapter, and its growth see Geoffrey Hand, 'The Medieval Chapter of St Mary's Limerick', in J.A. Watt, J.B. Morrall and F.X. Martin (eds) *Medieval Studies Presented to Aubrey Gwynn, SJ* (Dublin, 1961) pp 74-98; For the charter of Bishop Donatus see, James McCaffrey (ed.), *The Black Book of Limerick* (Dublin, 1907) pp 115-7.

² '... the assistants or deputies of the canons or prebendaries of collegiate churches, ... especially, though not exclusively, in the duties of the choir or chancel', (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 3623.)

³ Barrie Dobson, 'The English Vicars Choral; An Introduction', in Richard Hall and David Stocker (eds), *Vicars Choral at English Cathedrals* (Exeter, 2005), p. 9.

⁴ McCaffrey, *Black Book of Limerick*, p. 46.

⁵ H.S. Sweetman (ed.), *Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland 1302-07* (London, 1896) p. 289.

⁶ J.A. Twemlow (ed.), *Calendar of Entries in the Papal Registers relating to Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 13, part 2 (London, 1955) pp 500-02.

⁷ E.A. MacLysaght and J.F. Ainsworth, 'The Arthur Manuscript', *NMAJ*, vol. 8, no 1 (1958), pp 3-17.

⁸ Arthur MS British Library Add. Ms 13885, f.229. Balbein's will did not form part of MacLysaght and Ainsworth's publication because parts of it had already been published by Maurice Lenihan in his history.

Richard Bultingford left an annual charge on 'a messuage at the little laneway near the cemetery of Blessed Mary' for a service twice a year, while in 1445 Geoffrey Galway left 6s 8d.⁹

As well as monetary bequests, the vicars were supported by the income of churches and lands, allotted them by the bishop. The White Manuscript contains a taxation of the diocese which lists the vicars as holding the vicariates of St Nicholas's parish church in Limerick, Rathurd, Crecora and Corcomohide, the rectories of Kilmoylan and Clonelty, Cloncagh, and the chapels of Kilgobbin, Mineta, and Magrainy.¹⁰ Though copied in the seventeenth century this list probably does reflect the status quo at the end of the medieval period and Lenihan thought it dated to the time of Bishop O'Dea (1400-26).

The Vicars also received holdings within the city. The only medieval reference to such is from Thomas Balbein's will in which he bequeathed them his main dwelling house (*domu mansionis*).¹¹ A deed of 1783 allows us to identify a further four properties which are described as part of the college liberties and which probably reflect part of the medieval urban holding.¹² One of these is described as fronting on the south with 'the lane leading from the Bow to the Iron Gate', with a house, not belonging to the vicars, to the west and to the east 'the lane or passage from the Bow to the Deans Court' (Crosbie Row). A second house also fronts the lane to the Iron Gate, with the Dean's garden to the rear a house, not belonging to the vicars, to the east and the city wall as the west boundary. There therefore seems to be a row of at least three houses between the city wall and, what is now, Crosbie Row, so it is interesting to note that the Hardiman map in Trinity College Dublin depicts three houses here.¹³ The two other properties lie on the south side of Bow Lane. A house is described as fronting Bow Lane, with St Mary's Churchyard as the east boundary, Widow Sexton's garden to the west and a garden to the south. The other is a garden which runs from the wall of St Mary's churchyard and down to the city wall, with the Treasurer's garden to the south and Bowman's Plot to the north. The Hardiman map depicts a row of houses running parallel with the west front of the Cathedral, with gardens to the rear that run down to the city wall, though there is no garden running the whole length up to the churchyard.

There is a smattering of individuals in the sources who are called vicar of Limerick, though it is by no means certain these are all Vicars Choral. Adam, 'vicar of Limerick' was a witness to charters in the period 1251-72.¹⁴ In 1307, a court in Cork levied £8 from the goods of John and Cecilia de Cromyll for John de Ros, 'vicar of the church of St. Mary, Lymerick', following an earlier judgment in court at Any, while in the same year Fyel, 'vicar of the church of Lymerick', had his case for wrongful ejection from the custody of the house of St. Laurence's, dismissed.¹⁵ In 1311, Peter, 'vicar of the church of S. Mary, Limerick', appeared in court on behalf of Bishop Robert, to claim benefit of clergy for the bishop's clerk, Adam, who had been found guilty of abduction.¹⁶

⁹ Thomas J. Westropp, 'St Mary's Cathedral, its plan and growth', *JRSAI*, vol. 29 (1890) pp 112-25:121-2.

¹⁰ M. Lenihan, *Limerick: Its History and Antiquities* (Limerick, 1866) p. 565. The names have been modernised where known. The churches can also be found listed by deanery between pp 558-64. The O'Dea comment is on p. 557.

¹¹ Lenihan, *Limerick*, p. 565, fn. 7.

¹² Registry of Deeds 351/147/235372.

¹³ Eamon O'Flaherty, *Irish Historic Towns Atlas No. 21, Limerick* (Dublin, 2010) map 6.

¹⁴ McCaffrey, *Black Book of Limerick*, pp 46 & 104.

¹⁵ James Mills (ed.), *Calendar of Justiciary Rolls Ireland, Volume 2 1305-07* (London, 1914) pp 387 & 448.

¹⁶ Herbert Wood and Albert Langman (eds), *Calendar of Justiciary Rolls Ireland, 1308-14* (Dublin, no date) p. 208.

The college was situated on the western half of the block delineated by the present day Nicholas Street, Newgate Lane,¹⁷ Crosbie Row and St. Augustine Place which for most of its recorded history was called Bow Lane. The first edition of the Ordnance Survey (OS) map shows Gibson's Lane running north-south through the centre of the block to divide the long burgage plots facing onto Nicholas Street on the east from smaller units in the college area to the west.¹⁸ The only early map to show and name the college is the Hardiman, on which it is called 'The Old Colledg'. It shows buildings grouped together on the south side of the plot and, at its northern end, that the plot bounded against the internal cross wall of the city.¹⁹ The Vicars' Hall seems to have been at the southwest corner of the plot; a deed of 1763 records the lease of a plot of ground, bounded on the front by Bow Lane and the west by the hall.²⁰

It was usual that each vicar had his own small house grouped around a court, with a common hall and a chapel as part of the complex. The plans of several colleges are known from, or survive at, English Cathedrals and in some there is an upper and lower court.²¹ The most impressive is at Wells where originally forty-two houses, twenty-two on one side and twenty on the other, faced each other across a quadrangle measuring well over 100m in length.²² The houses were all more or less of equal size, measuring 6m by 3.9m internally and two storey, with hall and screens passage on the ground floor and a chamber at first floor level open to the roof. Both floors had a fireplace and the two were connected by a wooden spiral staircase sited in a projection on the back of the house, which also housed the latrines.

The 1841 first edition OS map of Limerick city shows a row of five small houses backing onto the north end of Gibson's Lane and a further five on Newgate Lane, with other buildings of indeterminate nature on Crosbie Row. Much of the southern part of the plot appears vacant except for the southeast (see fig. 1).²³ The houses on Gibson's Lane had disappeared by the time of the 1870 second edition OS map which suggests a possibility that they may have been survivals from the medieval period and, from their small size, some of the individual houses of the vicars. The same might be true of the houses on Newgate Lane, which seem to survive at least to 1870.

An 1887 history of the cathedral, states that, 'Hubert de Burgo, consecrated 1221, built the College of the Minor Canons, on the north side of the cathedral and connected with it by a Bow, in a house on which the verger resided'.²⁴ This story was repeated in this journal as late as 1940, when according to Monsignor Moloney, in an article on Gerald Griffin whose family once lived in Bow Lane; 'at the time Bow Lane still retained some of its medieval privacy as a Cathedral Close merely affording a convenient way for the pedestrians from the Main Street to the old harbour below the west front of St Mary's ...

¹⁷ Abbey Street on the first edition Ordnance Survey map.

¹⁸ The southern end of the lane was closed off by housing in the early-twentieth century but the remainder, opening onto Newgate Lane, survives: at present there is a roll-up gate across it.

¹⁹ The existence of this wall is shown most clearly on the map in the Hunt Museum, O'Flaherty *Atlas of Limerick*, map 7. Newgate Lane seems to have run along the external side of the wall.

²⁰ Registry of Deeds 222/273/148181.

²¹ See Hall and Stocker, *Vicars Choral at English Cathedrals*.

²² See Warwick Rodwell, 'Begun While the Black death Raged; The Vicars Close at Wells', in Hall and Stocker, *Vicars Choral at English Cathedrals*. The common hall takes the place of two houses on one side.

²³ The extract from the 1840 map, is taken from the set in the Jim Kemmy Museum. There are several buildings pencilled in on the southern part which appear to be the buildings constructed on site later and which appear on the 1870 second edition.

²⁴ No author given, *A Historic & Descriptive Sketch of St. Mary's Cathedral Limerick* (3rd edition, Limerick, 1887) p. 6.

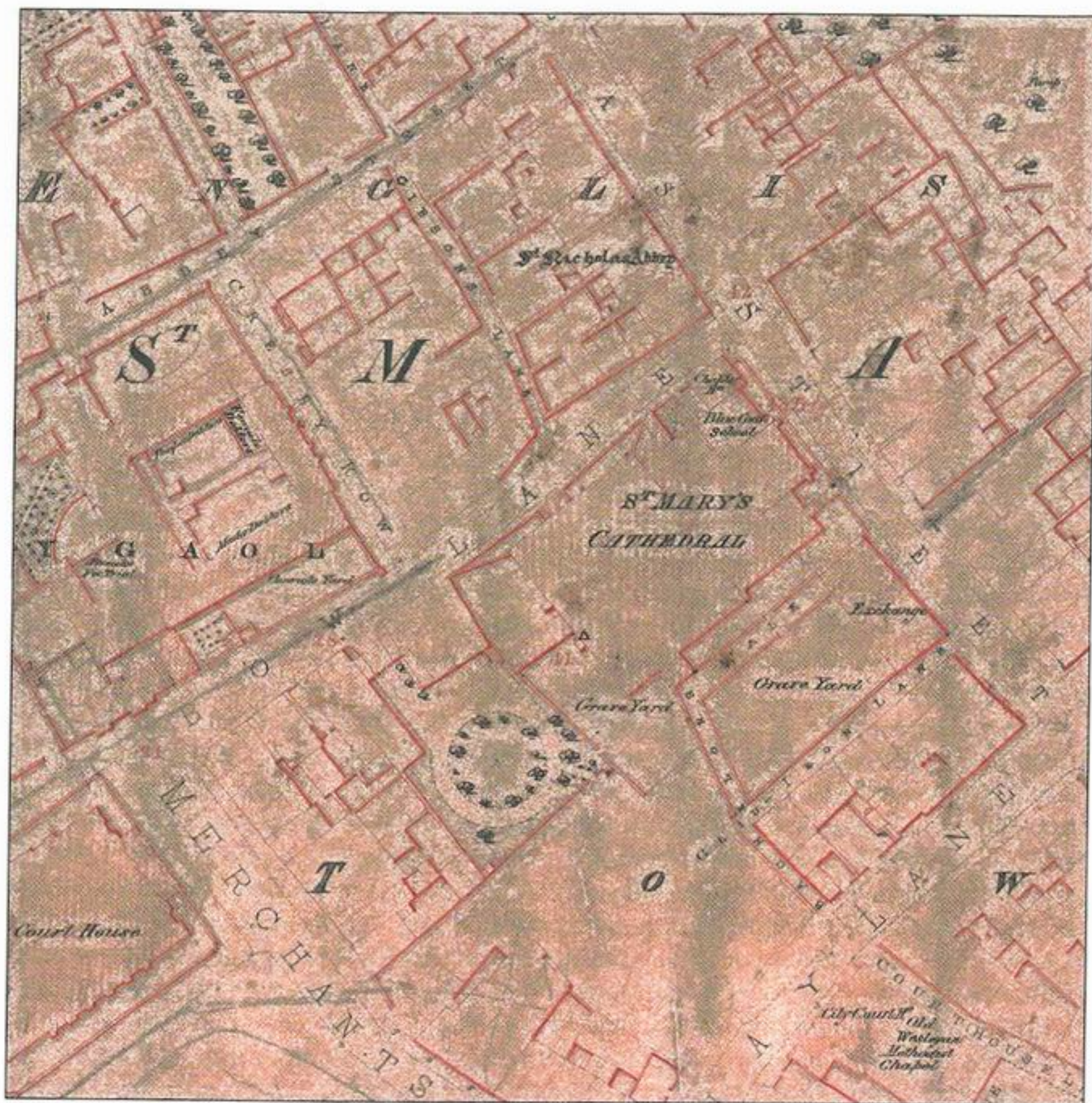


Fig. 1 Extract from the 1841 OS first edition, showing location of Gibson's Lane.

The arch that spanned the lane from the cathedral transept to the College of Minor Canons across the way still stood, though the passage beneath had been widened in 1770. The last Tudor arches and tracery of the ruined College disappeared in a building project about 1902.²⁵ This attribution of the construction of the College to Bishop Hubert is contained both in Lenihan and a later cathedral history, but neither of them mentions the Bow.²⁶ Elsewhere Lenihan actually refers to the discovery of a passage under Bow Lane that connected the two, a version repeated by Begley, 'An underground passage was discovered some years ago leading from it to the cathedral.'²⁷

²⁵ Rev. M. Moloney, 'Limerick and Gerald Griffin', *NMAJ*, vol. 2, no.1 (1940) p. 7.

²⁶ Lenihan, *Limerick*, p. 552; James Dowd (revised by Dean Talbot), *History of St Mary's Cathedral Limerick* (Limerick, 1936) p. 19.

²⁷ Lenihan, *Limerick*, p. 547; J. Begley, *The Diocese of Limerick, Ancient and Medieval* (Dublin, 1906) p. 380.

The existence of the Bow is not in doubt; Ferrar writing in 1787 stated that in 1770, 'This year a considerable improvement was made in Bow-lane; several feet of the church yard were taken into the lane; the verger's house, which stood over the bow, was taken down; the passage walls and gate at the north door of the church, which only served to hide the beauty of the cathedral, were all removed, by which means a good broad passage has been made to the quay and carriages can approach close to the church door, which they never could do before.'²⁸ It is the location of the Bow that is questionable. None of the pre-1770 maps shows a bow connecting the cathedral with the supposed house of canons.

While it is accepted that the row of buildings fronting Nicholas Street to the north of the Cathedral was church property, there is neither documentary nor cartographic evidence that this was a College of Minor Canons.²⁹ Limerick Museum has a photograph, titled College of the Minor Canons, showing a ruined building with later medieval tracery in the windows and a number of blocked-up round-arched doorways (fig. 2).³⁰ It is not absolutely clear whether this shows the building on the west or Vicars Choral side of Gibson's Lane which disappeared after the 1870 OS map, or the back end/western half of the property fronting onto High Street. If it is the latter, as the present writer believes,



Fig. 2 Later medieval building in Bow Lane (*Limerick Museum*, 0000.2797).

²⁸ John Ferrar, *History of Limerick* (Limerick, 1787) pp 131-2.

²⁹ In the Civil Survey of 1655, the Nicholas Street properties in this block are all rented from the church, R.C. Simington (ed.), *The Civil Survey A.D. 1654-1656, Vol. IV, County Limerick* (Dublin, 1938) pp 428-9 (pp 40-41 in original manuscript). The author knows of no document from the medieval period which refers to a college of minor canons.

³⁰ LM0000.2797.

then what we see in the photograph is opposite the north transept and there is no scarring from where the Bow would have joined to the building, in fact the Bow would have blocked some of the visible doors and windows. Nor is there any scarring on the cathedral transept, though later renovation works could have hid this. It is clear that the ground level outside the building has been dropped, the original threshold level of the round arched doors being at shoulder to head height of the girls posed against it. From Lenihan we know that the ground level in Bow Lane was reduced in 1814, which provides corroborating evidence that this photograph was taken in Bow Lane.³¹

The only map to depict a Bow is the Hardiman, which places the two-storey structure on the upper side of the junction of Bow Lane and Crosbie Row and so it may well have been physically attached to the college buildings.³² The function of the Bow is, however, unclear. In a British context such a structure could mark the entry into the cathedral close, or, as in the case of Wells, link the Vicars Choral with the Cathedral but in Limerick it does not obviously do either and seems to sit in the middle of church property at no readily recognisable boundary.³³

Returning, finally, to the depiction on the Hardiman map of the row of houses facing the west front of the cathedral, their access would appear to be hidden on the cathedral side of the row, which is the line this writer has previously argued is the earlier main street of the town.³⁴ This road is not shown on later maps and so it is suggested that with the re-organisation of the town in the early thirteenth century, this section of road was incorporated into the cathedral close. The presence of the treasurer's garden suggests that some at least of the canons, most of whose lodgings have never been identified, may have lived in this area.³⁵ While there is no direct evidence to support this suggestion there are two factors in its favour. Firstly there is really no other candidate area where the houses of the canons might have stood, and secondly the fact that this area was church property would explain the apparent blank in this area in the Civil Survey of 1654-56.³⁶

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Eamon O'Flaherty and Jennifer Moore for their help accessing the information contained in the Registry of Deeds.

³¹ Lenihan, *Limerick*, p. 706; Begley, *Diocese of Limerick*, p. 380, states that the buildings were demolished the year before publication of this volume of his history (1906).

³² There is a possible second depiction of the bow. The 1587 map in the British National Archives is highly inaccurate, showing the Cathedral as down on the quays, but just north of the cathedral it shows a road running through an arch in a two storey structure, O'Flaherty, *Atlas Limerick*, map 5.

³³ See for example various plans in Hall and Stocker, *Vicars Choral at English Cathedrals*.

³⁴ Brian Hodkinson, 'The Topography of Pre-Norman Limerick', *NMAJ*, vol. 42 (2002) pp 1-6:3.

³⁵ For the location of the Dean's, Precentor's (Chanter) and Archdeacon's houses (all major dignitaries) see O'Flaherty, *Atlas*, Text fig. 3.

³⁶ *Civil Survey, Vol. IV Co. Limerick* (see St. Mary's Parish). A draft attempt to map the Civil Survey, by Claire Lane, is held in the Limerick Museum collection.