

Location of the Ecclesiastical College, Stratford-upon-Avon

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This note seeks to establish the exact location of the medieval Ecclesiastical College building, near Holy Trinity Church. The context is the recent submission of a Planning Application to Stratford District Council to extend the property at Trinity Close. This provides the opportunity to conduct an archaeological excavation.

The College building was constructed in 1353 by Ralph de Stratford, Bishop of London, to house the priests who served in the chantry chapel established in 1331 by his uncle John de Stratford, Bishop of Winchester and Lord Chancellor of England (and subsequently, in 1333, Archbishop of Canterbury). Documents at the Shakespeare Centre Library and Archive (SCLA) record various purchases by Ralph between 1345 and 1350: of lands from Stratford Manor; of a messuage extending along the river to the Bancroft; and of a house in an alley near the church [1].

Following the Reformation, in 1548 the College building and surrounding land was held by a series of private owners, until in 1799 it was demolished. For a history of the College, see Gill [2].

The present-day site is bounded by the four streets shown in Fig. 1. The narrow laneway between the site and the church is an extension of the street called Old Town, but in this note is called Trinity Lane. Looking from the direction of the church, the property called Trinity Close is bounded by the Methodist church to the left, the Anglican Parish Centre to the right, and to the rear by the back yards of houses on College Street.



Fig. 1: Google satellite image of site of College, to the north-west of Holy Trinity Church

Appearance of the College

Various views of the College exist from the late 18th century, mostly front elevations seen from Trinity Lane looking toward the north-west. They show a large rectilinear building with a long range at the rear and symmetrical wings on either side of a courtyard. The grand entrance is at the rear of the courtyard, in line with the front gate on the central axis of the courtyard.

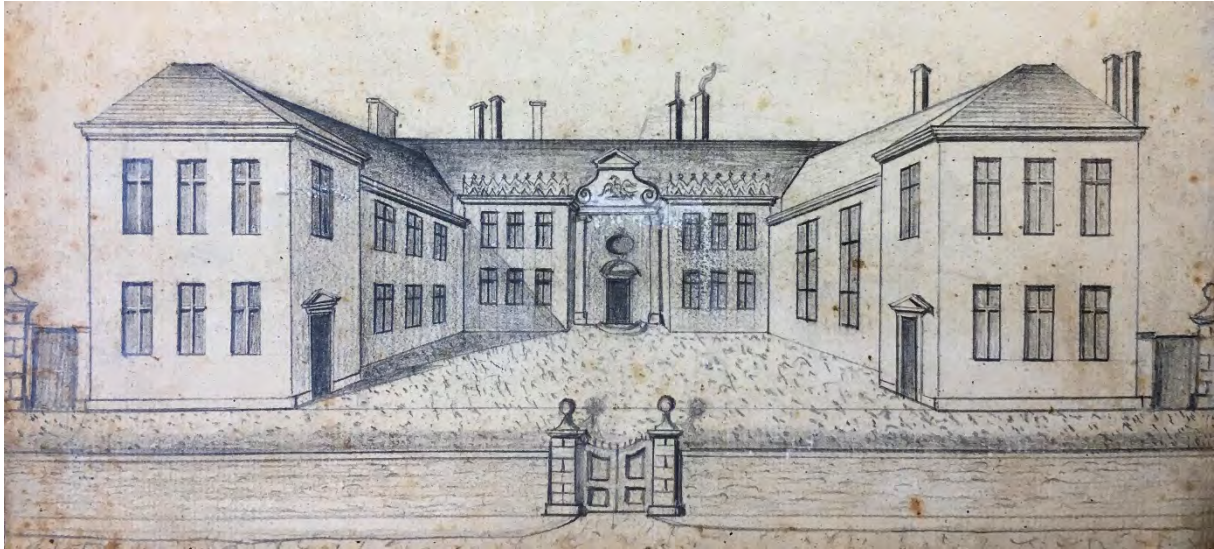


Fig. 2: Drawing of the College by John Jordan, around the time of the Jubilee (1769) [3]

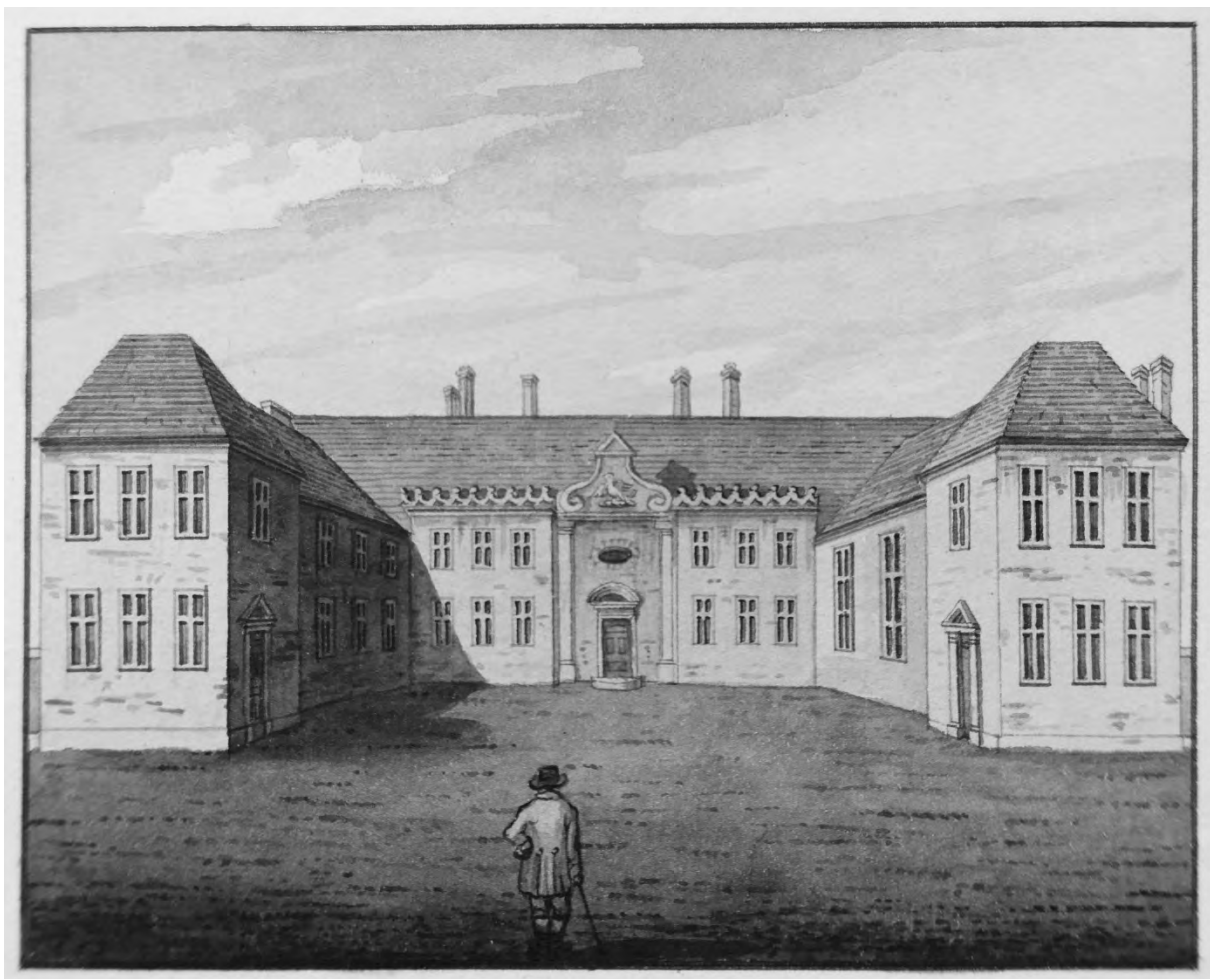


Fig. 3: Front view of the College by Captain James Saunders (c.1780) [4]

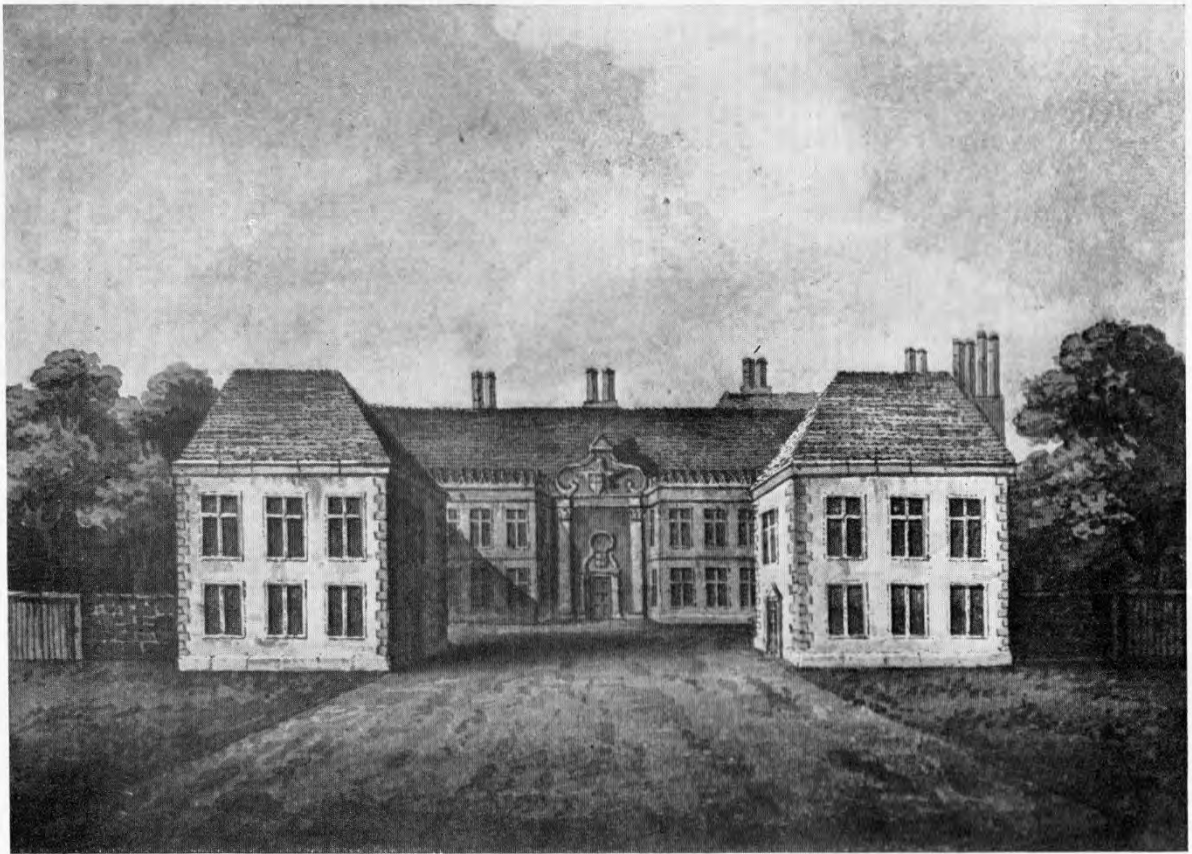


Fig. 4: Drawing of the College by Jeayes (c.1795) [5]

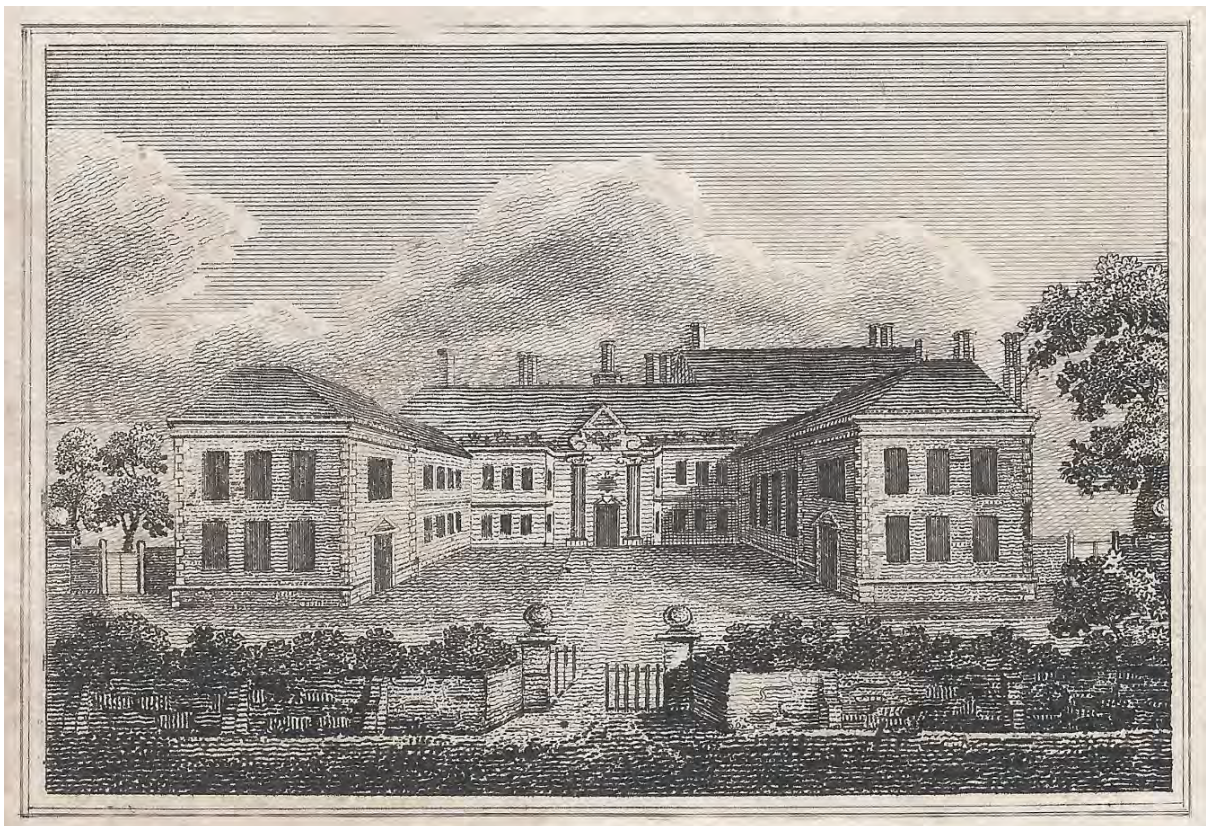


Fig. 5: Engraving of the College (1809) [6]

The engraving in Fig. 5 was published 10 years after the building was demolished in 1799, so must have been based on an earlier drawing, possibly that of Jeayes. The masonry is shown as stone blocks with quoins, and not rendered. There are also differences from Jordan's drawing in the gate and boundary wall, with buttresses and a recess to the gate pillars.

It is difficult to tell from the four drawings above how far the building was set back from the front wall, which is presumed to be on the Trinity Lane boundary. In the Jeayes and Saunders drawings, the wall does not appear. Jordan's drawing makes the building seem closer than the *Gent Mag* engraving. In both cases the wall appears to be closer to the front of the wings than they are to the main entrance at the rear of the courtyard.



Fig. 6: View of the College from the north-west (c.1790) [7]

In his first book (*History and Antiquities*, 1806) Robert Bell Wheler included a plate showing an oblique view of the rear and north wings of the College. The large door of the passage between the brew house and the barn is clearly shown on the right. The wall and gate at the front corner of the wing are visible, as in all of the above views from the front. To the left of the drawing the wall on Trinity Lane is visible, with the front of St Mary's house beyond. The alignment of the College wing appears to be toward the latter. The orientation of the College building appears to be similar to that of the church tower.

Old Plans of the Town

The earliest known plan of the town is that of Winter (1759), made while the College building was still standing. Although it does have a scale bar in chains, the map has a somewhat informal sketched quality. Note that compass north is in a 'two o'clock' direction.

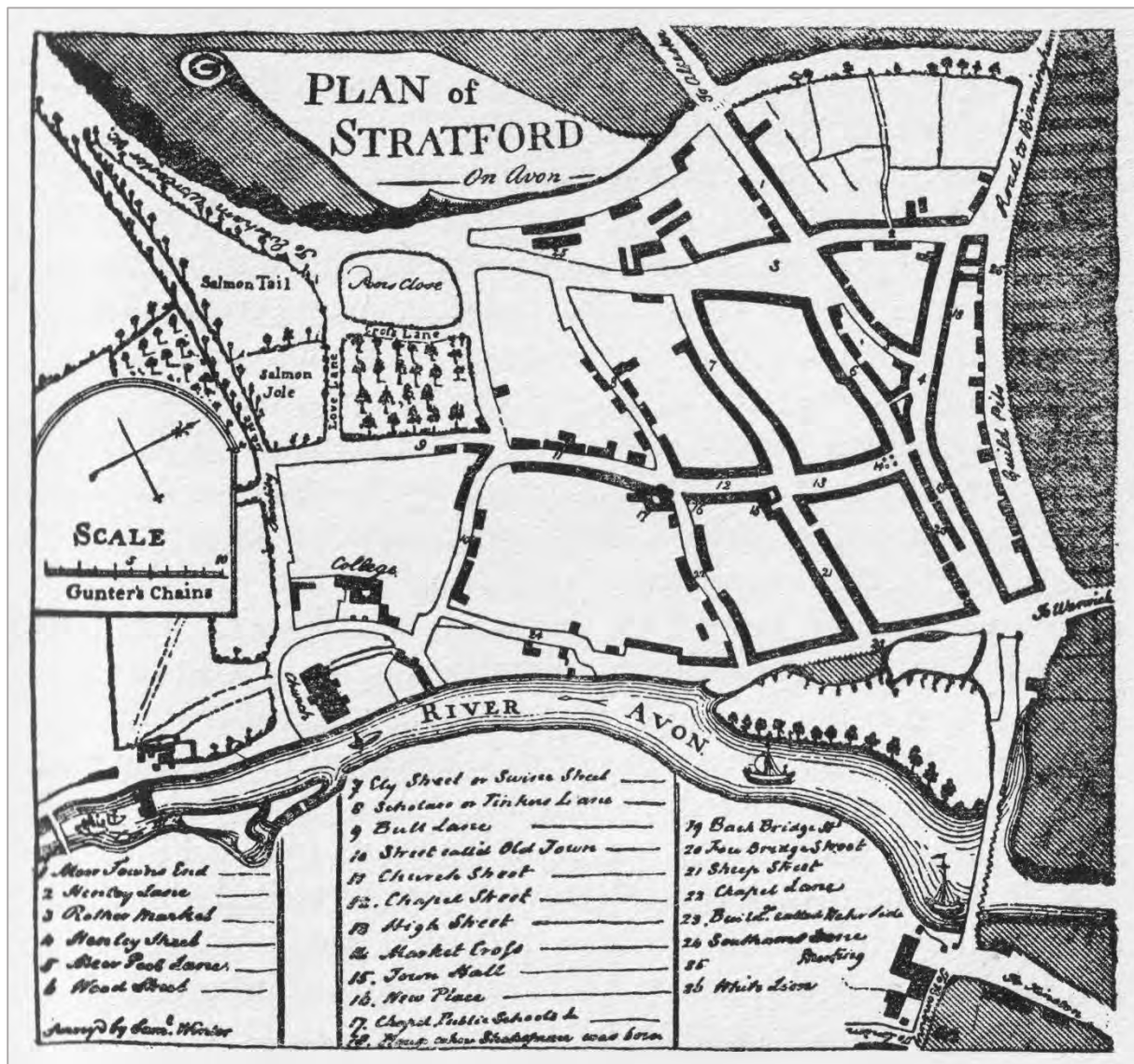


Fig. 7: Plan by Winter (1759), showing location of the College [8]

The College building is shown north-west of the church, with its central courtyard equidistant between College Lane (left) and Old Town (right), and on the line of Southern Lane. An L-shaped block of outbuildings, probably barns, are on College Lane. To the rear are open fields, as far as Bull Lane (now called Bull Street). College Street did not exist at that date.

Winter's map also shows the mill to the south of the church, St Mary's House to the north, and the Dower House, Old Town Croft and Hall's Croft along the north side of the 'Street called Old Town'. The function of the L-shaped building on Trinity Lane at the front right (north-east) corner of the College is not known. It may have been a gatehouse (lodge) or gardener's cottage or pavilion.

A subsequent plan with a similar level of detail was drawn by Wheler and included as the frontispiece of his second book *A Guide to Stratford-upon-Avon* (1814). The orientation and design of the map are so similar that it is tempting to suppose that Wheler traced the street layout from Winter's map before adding his own details. The dotted line, representing the borough boundary, possibly follows the boundary of the ancient manorial land around the church and the mill.



Fig. 8: Plan of the town by R.B. Wheler (1814) [9]

Wheler says of the College (pp.94-95): 'This venerable building stood within the wall to the west of the churchyard, and was surrounded by pleasure grounds and gardens, in all probability considerably more extensive than what are now enclosed. It was constructed of hewn stone; and was a capacious, strong, handsome and convenient edifice. ... it was purchased by the late Edmund Battersbee, Esq. of this town, and by him, to the great regret of the inhabitants of Stratford, entirely taken down in 1799 and 1800. ... At the north-east corner of the college close, opposite the entrance to the church yard, formerly stood the old tythe barn, a building of unusually large dimensions, which was taken down by the corporation many years since. Like the college, it was not remarkable for any particular carved work, or ornaments.'

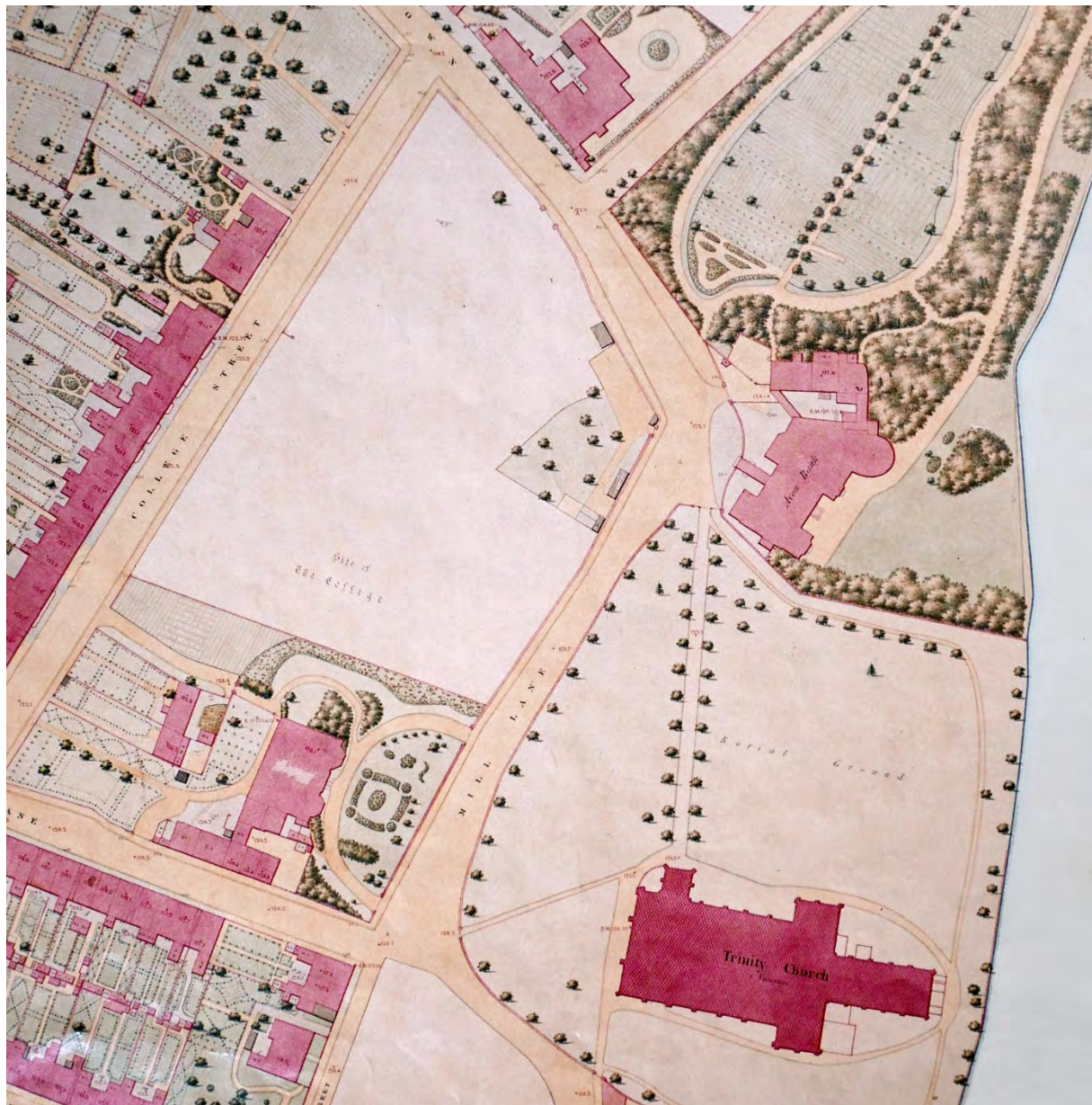


Fig. 9: Detail of the College site from Board of Health street plan (1851) [10]

The Board of Health plan of the town was drawn in 1851 at a scale of 10 feet to the mile, preparatory to laying sewers throughout the town. It is beautifully detailed and tinted in watercolour. College Street had been constructed around 1830, and by 1851 all of the houses along the west side had been built, except near the junction with Old Town. The old St Mary's House had been demolished and the villa Avon Bank built in its place.

Elmhurst occupied the southern end of the College land, incorporating the barn on College Lane. The corner of the block adjacent to Old Town (nearest to Avon Bank) was fenced off as an orchard. The site of the College is marked on this map, quite close to the boundary of Elmhurst, but the remainder of the block is completely devoid of detail, and seems to be an open field, containing a single tree. Given that the overall length of the church is 200 feet, the width of the College block, perpendicular to College Street, is 242 feet.

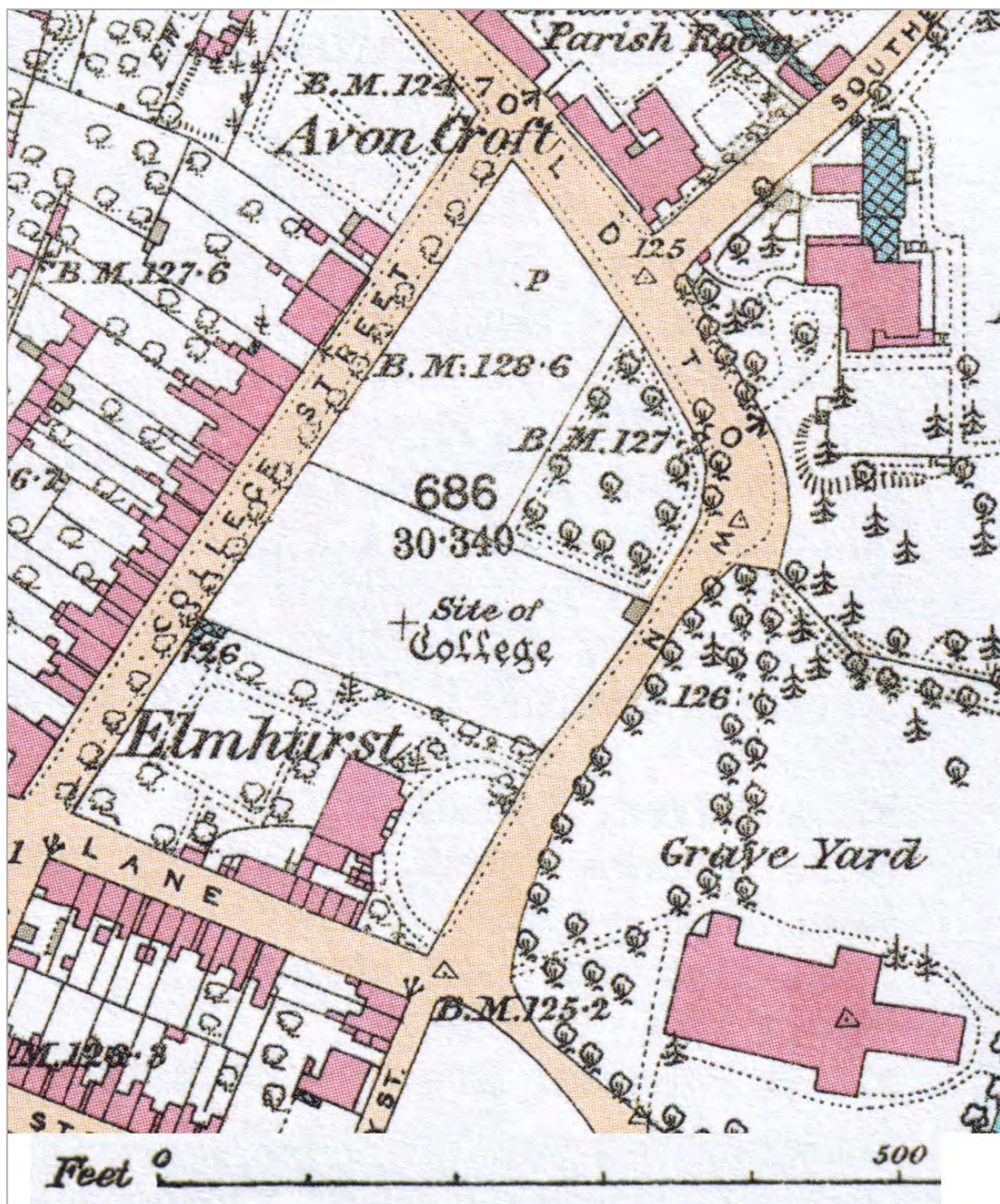


Fig. 10: Detail of the College site from OS Map (1885) [11]

The first Ordnance Survey map of 1885 had a scale of 1:2500 (about 15 inches to a mile). Not much had changed since the 1851 map, although Avon Bank had undergone major alterations and the enclosure of the orchard had been enlarged. According to the scale, the width of the block is 240 feet (i.e. distance between opposite boundaries, perpendicular to College Street). The crosshair shows the 'Site of College', though it is not clear whether this represents the centre of the courtyard or some other reference point.

Ground Plans

In Fig. 11 are juxtaposed details of the maps in Figs. 7,8 showing the location of the College in each.

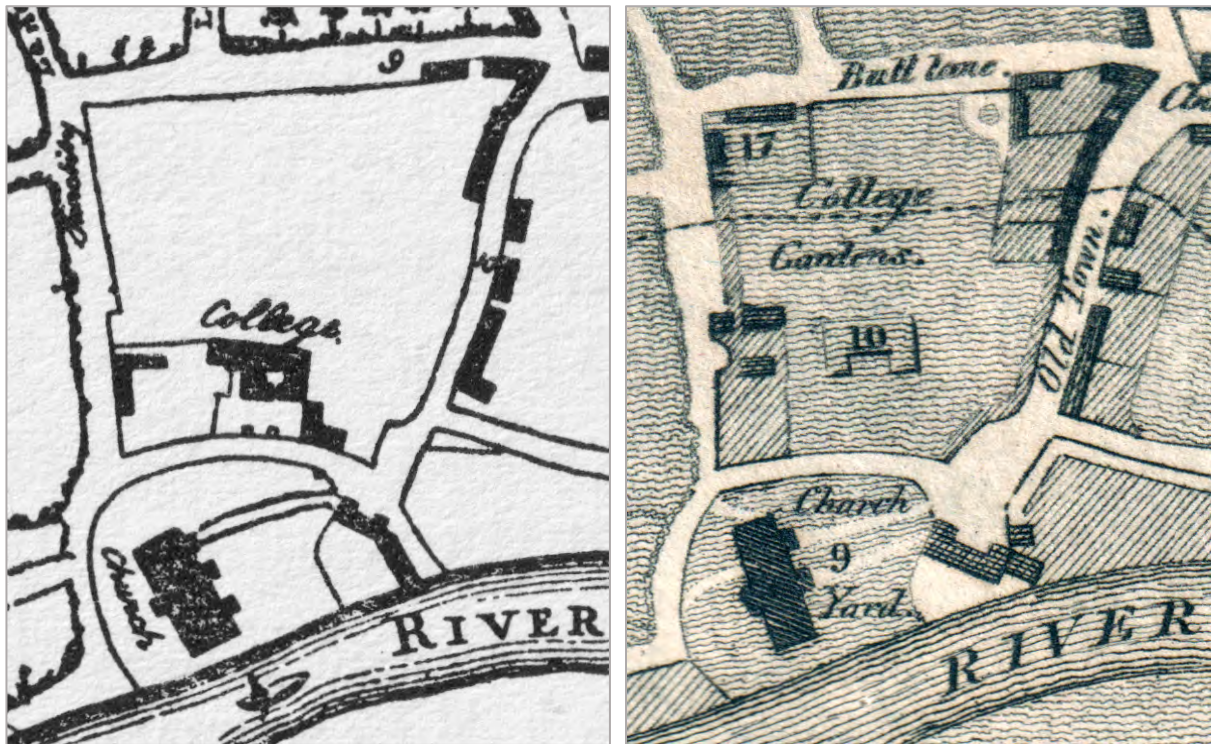


Fig. 11: Details of maps by Winter (left) and Wheler (right), showing the setting of the College



Fig. 12: Composites of Winter's map (red, left) and Wheler's map (green, right) with OS map (grey)

Transparently overlaying the details of Fig. 11 with the OS map in Fig. 10 shows the approximate location of the College in each case relative to the modern street plan (Fig. 12). The maps of Winter and Wheler have been rotated and scaled in order to bring the river bank, church and streets into correspondence as far as possible. The result is that for Winter, the distance between the front of the College building and the front boundary wall is approximately the same as the distance between the rear of the building and College Street, i.e. $(240-108)/2 = 66$ feet. In the case of Wheler, the front of the College building is further from Trinity Lane and the rear is near to the edge of College Street. The centreline of the courtyard is slightly closer to the Dower House, i.e. further from Elmhurst.

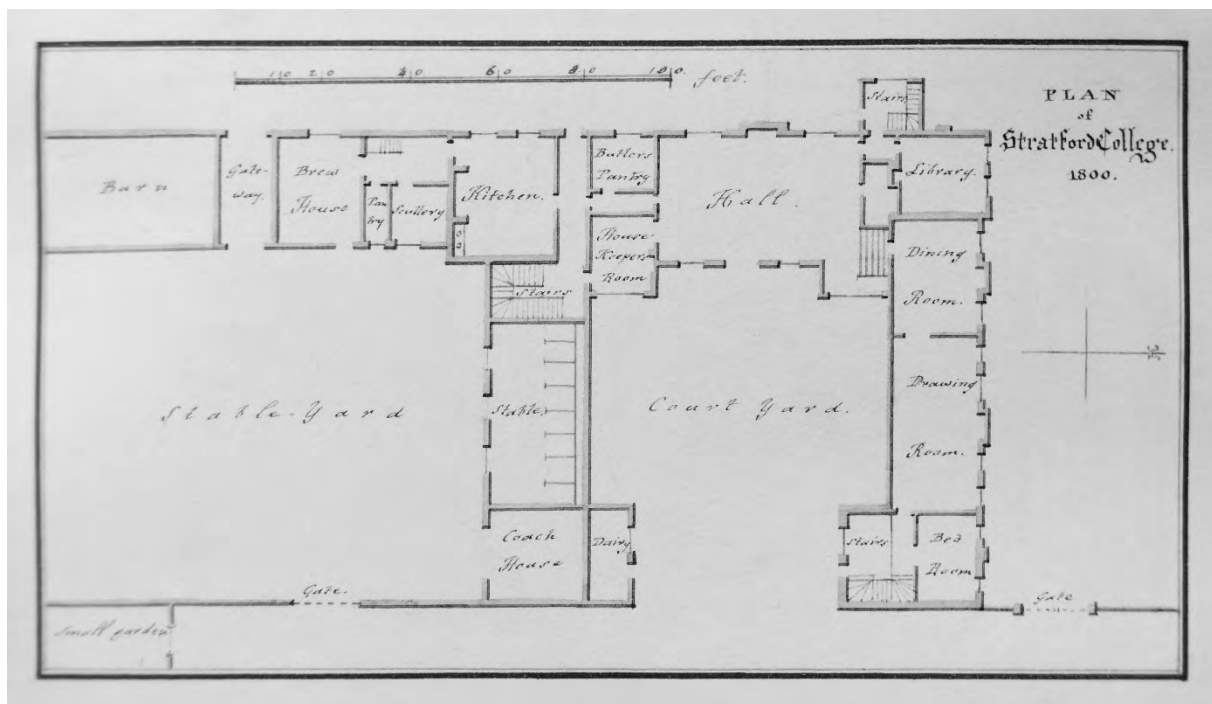


Fig. 13: Plan of the College by Captain James Saunders (c.1780) [12]

For a more accurate estimate, we can use the floor plan drawn by Saunders (Fig. 13). From the scale, the width between the outer faces of the wings was 115 feet, the depth between the front of the wings and the rear wall of the building was 108 feet, and the depth from the front of the wings to the grand entrance was 80 feet. The width of the courtyard was 68 feet and the width between the inner faces of the wings (at the front) was 48 feet.

Orientation and boundary wall

It is not clear how the College building was orientated:

- a) Alignment with the pre-existing laneways (Mill, Sanctus and Old Town) cannot be assumed because these were meandering routes into the original Saxon settlement.
- b) The church was the major nearby landmark. Its chancel, transepts and tower are turned by about 7° south of east. The nave, nearer the college, is turned by about 11.5° south of east.
- c) It may be that the College was positioned simply to give a good view from the front windows of the church and across the river to the Cotswold hills.
- d) The subdivision of the block, after the College had been demolished, seems to have set boundaries for Elmhurst and the orchard parallel to College Lane, creating trapezoidal plots (Fig. 10). College Street is irrelevant because it was laid out later.

Comparison of the outlines of the College building in Fig. 11 shows that Wheler's version: is rotated anti-clockwise by about 10° ; has wings further apart (i.e. a wider courtyard); lacks the service wing on the rear left; and is set back further from Trinity Lane (aligned with the centre of the Dower House rather than its river end on the corner of Southern Lane).

The only surviving physical evidence above ground is the wall of Trinity Lane. It would be reasonable to assume that this ran parallel to the lateral axis of the College building (Fig. 9).



Fig. 14: Street view of Trinity Close, showing old wall and entrance gate

The boundary wall of the Trinity Close site is assumed to be, at least in part, the same wall that existed in the 18th century before the College building was demolished. Moreover the blue lias stone in the lower part of the wall to the left of the gate may be much older. The gate hangs on pillars that are recessed diagonally from the front (see Fig. 5).



Fig. 15: Elevated view of Trinity Close, showing central path from front gate [13]

Because the position of the front gate is assumed to be the same, the path from the front gate of Trinity Close, at right angles to the front wall, is also assumed to be on the same central axis as the courtyard of the original College building. This provides a means of estimating its location.

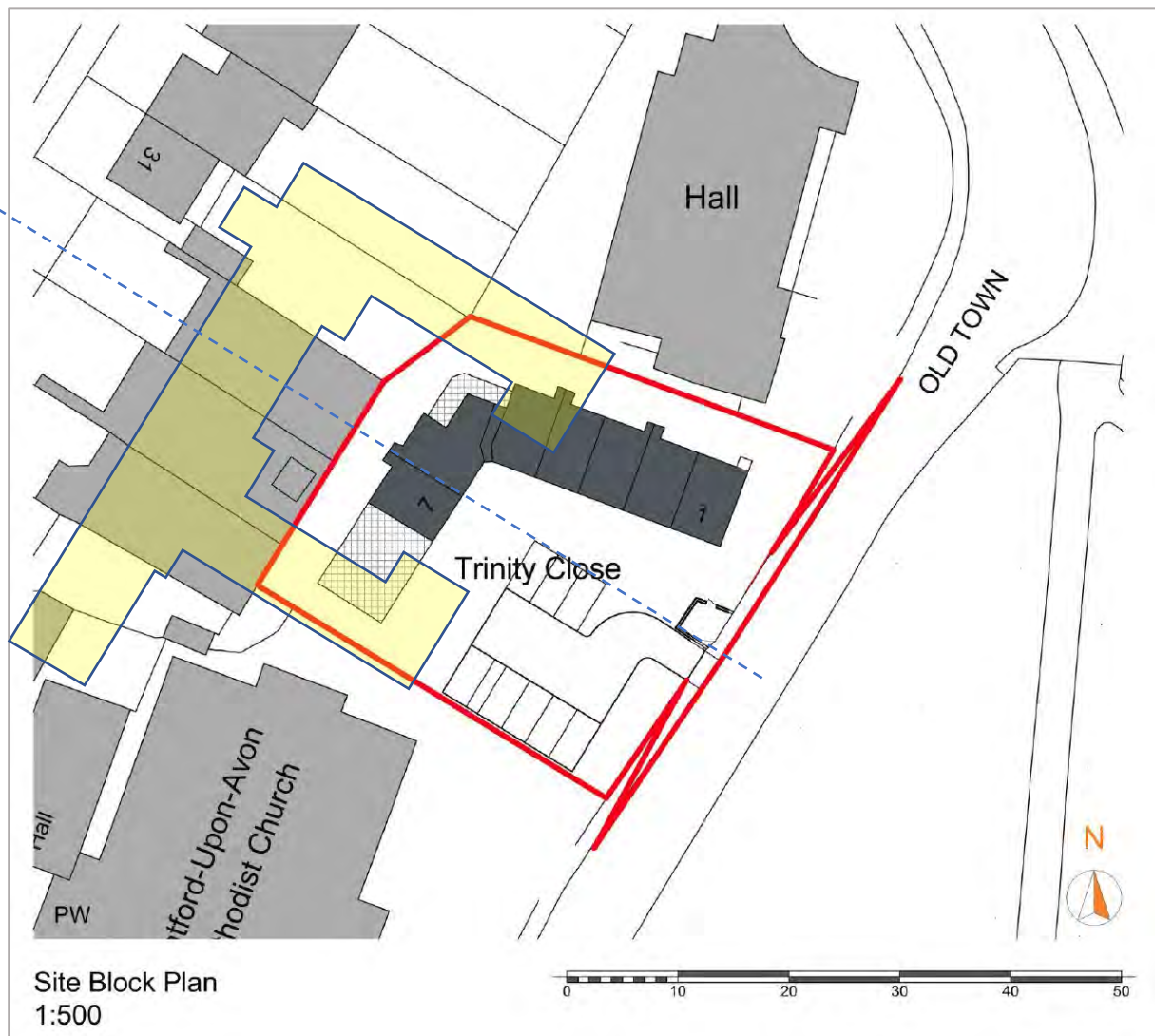
Proposed Location of College Building

Fig. 16: Outline of Saunders' plan of College building, over site of proposed development (scale in metres)

Fig. 16 shows the outline of the College building, copied from the Saunders plan in Fig. 13, superimposed on the site plan submitted with the Planning Application. According to the scale, the distance between College Street and Old Town Lane is 75 metres = 245 feet. The outline of the College is scaled so that its depth of 108 feet = 33 metres. Assuming the location shown in the Winter plan is correct, the outline is positioned to be equidistant from College Street and Trinity Lane, i.e. 21 metres front and rear, and with the courtyard on the axis of the front gate (blue dotted line). The proposed extension of the Trinity Close building lies on top of the south wing of the College, marked on the Saunders drawing as containing the Stables and Coach House. The rear wing of the College extends to a position close to the end wall of the hall behind the Methodist Church.

Warwickshire Archaeology has proposed a different location of the College building in two reports: (a) excavations at the Methodist Church in 2013 [14]; and (b) the assessment of the investigations needed before the extensions to Trinity Close [15]. This corresponds closely to the position of the College in the drawing by Wheler (Fig. 11, right and Fig. 12, right), which has the rear wall close to the present-day pavement of College Street. If this were the case, the College building would have been located entirely outside the Trinity Close curtilage.

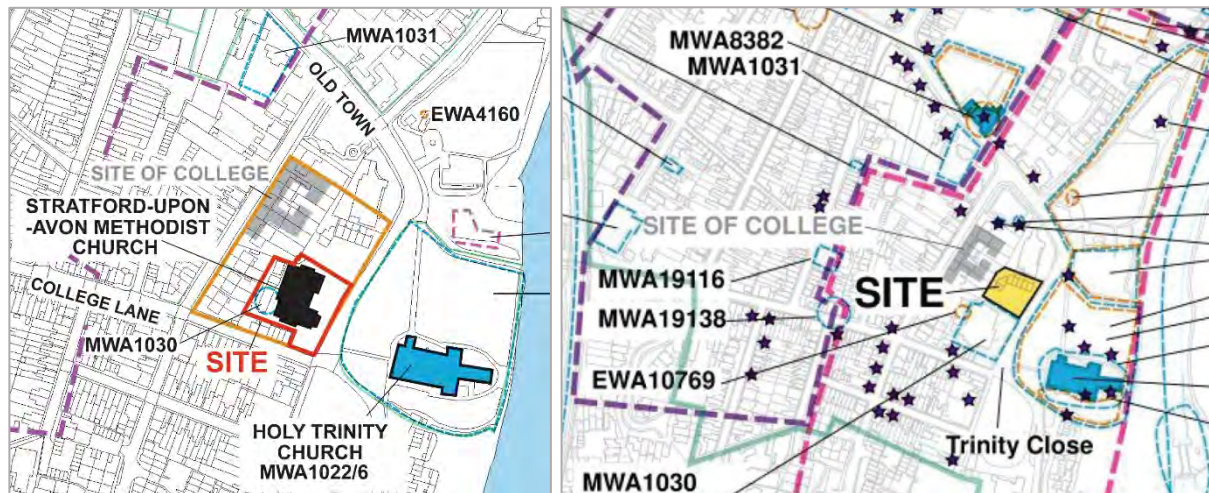


Fig. 17: Location of College building, as conjectured by Warwickshire Archaeology

Relationship to earlier excavation

An excavation at the rear of the Methodist Church was carried out in 2013, prior to extension of the church hall. It is documented in the Archaeology Warwickshire Report No 1840, by Cathy Coutts and Iain Soden, published in 2019 [14]. Fig. 18 shows in green the medieval remains, described in Sections 5.7 to 5.12 of the report. The wall (denoted 15/85) 'had been a substantial limestone structure some 1m wide'. Comparison with the placement of the Saunders floor plan (Fig. 16) shows that it must have been the end wall of the rear wing; to the north-east was the Brew House, and to the south-west was the broad passageway for wagons between the house and the barn. The parallel gully (in blue, denoted 141) may have been a rut made by cart wheels.

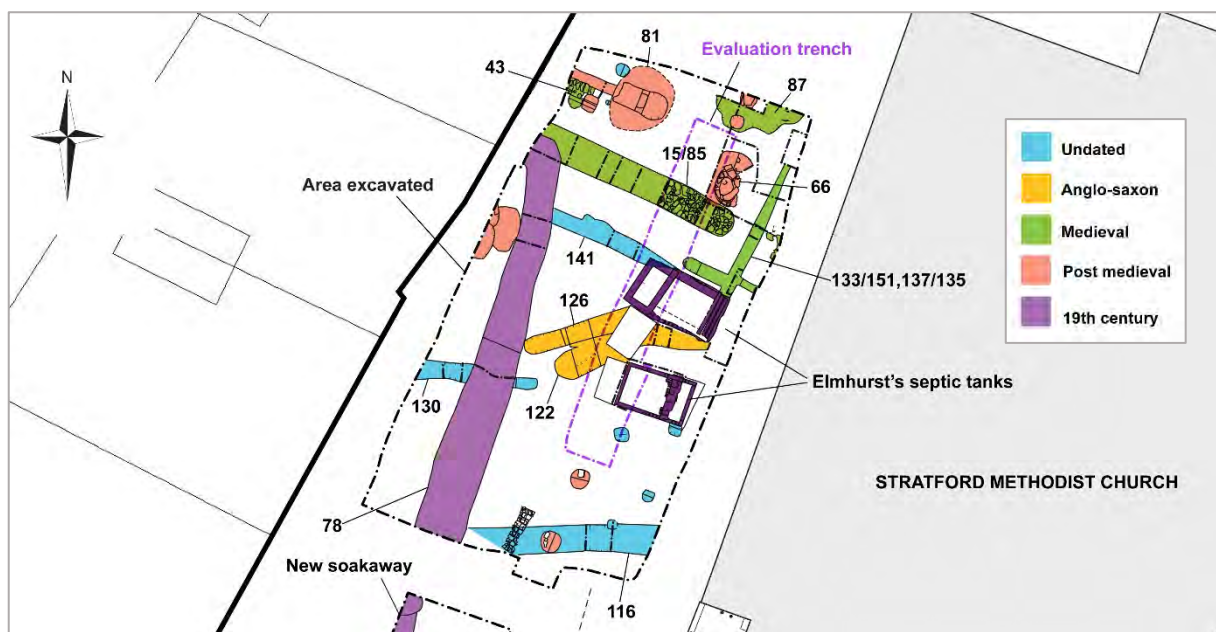


Fig. 18: Detail from Figure 10 of report by Coutts and Soden of the archaeological dig in 2013

Evidence from Aerial Photography

The imprint of ancient structures is sometimes retained in the earth, because of differences in the chemical composition of the soil. As a result the surface vegetation may be differentiated in its growth, thus revealing the underlying structure. One would expect the vegetation to be suppressed on the paths and in the courtyard, because of the hard-packed gravel and lime surface. On the other hand where the stone floors of the building have been taken up and the stone robbed from foundations, there would remain trenches and lowered areas. These were most likely filled with soil to restore the ground level, and would therefore be more fertile.

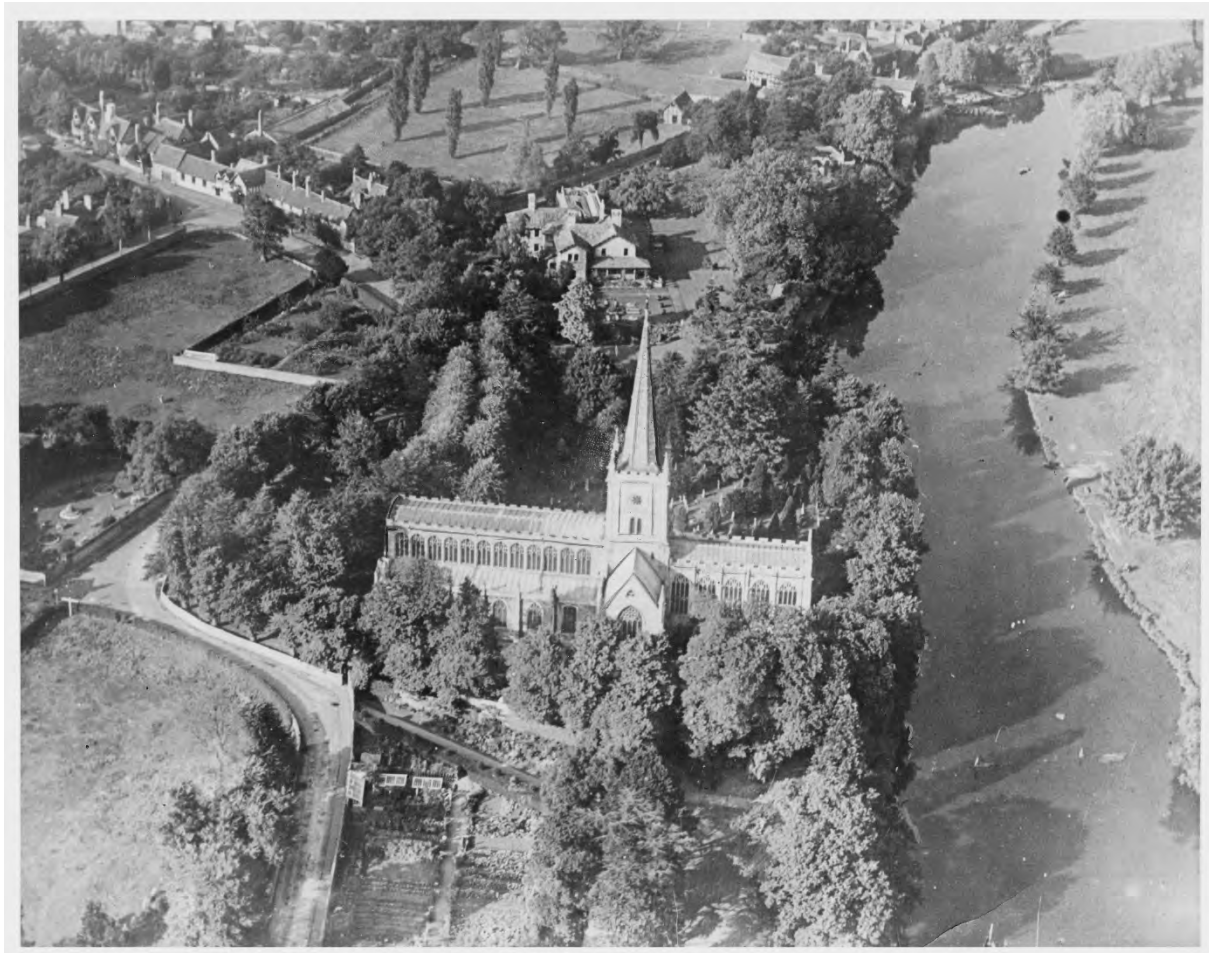


Fig. 19: Aerial photograph of Holy Trinity Church and surrounding land on 18th July 1931 [16]

The land associated with the College is shown clearly in the upper left of Fig. 19, a large-format aerial photograph taken in afternoon sun during the cool wet summer of 1931. The layout remained the same as in 1885 (Fig. 10), with an open field where the College once stood, and a single tree close to the Old Town boundary. Elmhurst still occupied the southern end, and the north-eastern corner was still enclosed, perhaps the kitchen garden for Avon Bank.

An enlarged section with enhanced contrast is shown in Fig. 20, in which the imprint of the northern wing is clearly defined. It is in a position very similar to that proposed in Fig. 16, slightly overlapping the wall of the enclosure and with its front face aligned with the path through the centre of the enclosed garden. From the map in Fig. 10, this would mean that the front of the wings was set back from Trinity Lane by about 55 feet (17 metres), a little less than the 21 metres shown in Fig. 16. Below the wing in Fig. 20 is the courtyard, in the centre of which is a circular feature of approximate diameter 12 feet, which may once have been an ornamental pond. Beyond the northern wing appears to be another paved area surrounded by former outbuildings or flower beds. The imprint of the southern wing is concealed behind the trees on the Elmhurst boundary.



Fig. 20: Enlarged and enhanced area of Fig. 19, showing traces of the College building

Conclusions

By analysing the historical evidence, the most likely position of the medieval College has been estimated. The plan of the building, based on the drawing by Saunders (Fig. 13), when superposed over the Trinity Close site plan (Fig. 16), shows that the south wing of the College lay within the curtilage of Trinity Close. Moreover the proposed extension of the Trinity Close apartment building lies directly over the foundations of the south wing.

This situation makes a more extensive excavation essential to locate the foundations of the building and to retrieve any medieval artefacts from the deposits. Previously, medieval seal matrices have been found in the vicinity [17]. The Archaeological Assessment [15, Sec. 5.5 and Fig. 9] proposes to excavate a 1x10m trial trench across the area of the proposed extension. If the estimated location of the building (Fig. 16) in this report is correct, this trench is likely to reveal the foundation of one wall, on the inner face (courtyard side) of the south wing. We recommend:

- 1) Contingency for excavating a larger area up to 15x10m to reveal all of the wing within the site;
- 2) A second trial trench across the rear corner of the Trinity Close block to reveal the north wing;
- 3) Thorough sweep of the whole site with a metal detector to find any buried metallic objects.

This is not just any old building. It was the Ecclesiastical College, built in 1353 by the Bishop of London, to house the priests serving at the St Thomas Becket chantry chapel in Holy Trinity Church, which had been established in 1331 by the Archbishop of Canterbury. The College became wealthy and powerful and took over the advowson of the church. After the Reformation it remained the largest house in the town for a further 250 years. Its importance to the history of Stratford cannot be over-emphasised.

References

1. SCLA items BRT1/3/168: Grant by John de Peyto, who held the manor at farm from the bishop of Worcester, to Ralph de Stretford of all the lands and tenements previously held by Isabella, wife of William de Hatton [3 August 1345]; BRT1/2/217: Power of attorney by Thomas Dersington, parson of Aynho, to John de Clopton 'to deliver seisin to Ralph [de Stratford] bishop of London, of a house 'en la venelle sur Auene vers la Eglise de Stretford'. Done à Stortford, le Lundy en la feste des Aumes'. [All Souls], 23 Edw.III [2 November 1349].
2. Sylvia Gill (2021) The College of Priests, Chapter 3 in L&S MacDonald (eds) *Exploring Shakespeare's Church*, <https://www.stratfordsociety.co.uk/files/Exploring-Shakespeares-Church.pdf> pp.39-56
3. SCLA ER1/19, f.11
4. SCLA ER1/69/15, f.31
5. Aylesford Collection, Birmingham Central Library, accession number 390548. Reproduced in VCH (1946), plate facing p.11
6. *Gentleman Magazine*, March 1809, p.209
7. Robert Bell Wheler (1806) *History and Antiquities of Stratford-upon-Avon*, Stratford: J. Ward, facing p.90
8. SCLA ER1/109/1 illustrations, c. 1801. Reproduced in Levi Fox (1953) *The Borough Town of Stratford*, p.49
9. Robert Bell Wheler (1814) *A Guide to Stratford-upon-Avon*, Stratford: J. Ward
10. Map of Stratford (1851) on fourteen sheets, surveyed by the Ordnance Survey for the Local Board of Health Scale: 10 feet to the mile. SCLA BRT7/9
11. Ordnance Survey Map (1885), Warwickshire Sheet XLIV.6 Reproduction by Alan Godfrey Maps (2015)
12. SCLA ER1/69/13, f.29
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15. Hannah Childs (2021) *Trinity Close, Stratford-upon-Avon: Archaeological Assessment*, Archaeology Warwickshire, February 2021.
16. Aerial photograph by Pacific & Atlantic Photos, Inc., New York, reference 120586, print size 10" x 8"
17. SCLA objects STRST : SBT 1933-2/1 and STRST : SBT 1933-2/2. The notes for both say: "Bronze seal matrix, excavated in the grounds of Stratford-upon-Avon College before the building was demolished in 1797."