Out and About in Exeter: Women's Visibility in Late Sixteenth and Early Seventeenth Exeter

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"Women outnumbered men in early modern towns", so states Whittle *et al,* in their research into the experience of work in early modern England (Whittle, Hailwood, Robb and Aucoin 2025, 111). This being so, how visible were the women of Elizabethan Exeter? Where might you find them, what would they be doing and would this be very different from men? This article explores the presence of women in this early modern city and suggests that, although the evidence is fragmentary and impressionistic, this city's spaces were not heavily gendered: women were out and about in much the same places as men and their lived experiences there did not differ significantly from those of men.

To set the scene; Exeter is located in the far south west of England, a city and county in its own right, set in the wider county of Devonshire. Courtesy of the wool trade, by the 1520s it became the fifth largest provincial capital/port city in England in terms of taxable wealth. By the later sixteenth century it housed approximately 8-10,000 inhabitants and continued to grow, becoming one of the social and cultural capitals of the south west region and an important port (Hoskins 1976, 148; Allan, Alcock and Dawson 2015, 45). As a result, it continuously reinvented its built environment within the space encircled by its Roman walls and on its Saxon street pattern. Upgrading, infilling, encroachment, subdivision and upwards extension reflected the needs of a rapidly growing population along with expanding suburbs to its east and industrial areas to its west (Allan, Alcock and Dawson 2015, 35-67). The long, wide medieval High Street fulfilled the function that a piazza or central market square might otherwise do, but Southernhay, the only place to muster large crowds and to hold at least one of its fairs, was outside the walls. By the later sixteenth century, conduit houses supplied water in its main streets, almshouses supported the impotent poor and a workhouse catered for those perceived as less deserving. Cloth drying racks filled other public open spaces apart from Cathedral Close, the place where most people were buried but also where other often illicit activity took place (Orme 2009, 23). Vernacular architecture was the norm, with the stand-out exception of the civic Guildhall's 1593-4 façade, built with a classical stone portico topped by painted corinthian columns (Blaylock 1990).

Returning to the questions in hand, Danielle van den Heuvel reminds us that earlier twentieth century historians focused on the idea that, between 1600 and 1850, men and women increasingly occupied 'separate spheres' after a 'golden age' of relative freedom and equality with men. The theory was that men became primarily engaged with business and politics in the more dangerous, outdoor 'public sphere' whilst women focused more on domestic matters in the protected, safe, indoor 'private sphere'. These views were based on didactic, legal and prescriptive printed literature, such as conduct books or visitors' passing impressions captured in their journals (Van den Heuvel 2019, 693-710). Van den Heuvel goes on to demonstrate that this dichotomy is now regarded as outmoded, due to the spatial turn in the study of early modern history, a shifted focus away from elite society and the use of a wider range of sources to investigate women's presence in places and spaces, made in contributions and through debate about women's and gender history since the 1980s. She states "it is now commonly accepted that, despite conventions or restrictions, 'women were there', be it in work, in politics, or in the street" (Van den Heuvel 2019, 696).

One of the case studies she refers to in support of this is Fiona Williamson's study of gendered space in seventeenth century Norwich, a city of similar size to Exeter (Williamson 2014, 125-160). Williamson states "it would have been highly impractical and largely

impossible for women to avoid the streets, and neither would most people have felt this to be a desirable state of affairs" (Williamson 2014, 143). She exploits Norwich's Diocesan court defamation suits and coroner's inquests to study the private/public divide, places of activities and how both sexes were treated in and spoken about in streets, markets and alehouses. She points out that whilst there were boundaries between public and private domains they were, quoting Alexander Cowen, "hardly sharp and not always significant" and she found herself unable to distinguish a clear gendered map of the city (Cowen 2008, 313-33). In addition to the streets, markets and alehouses, she found women in gaol, by the riverside and present in doorways – all places where men were also found. She also draws attention to a satirical illustrative source, the woodcut *Tittle-Tattle Or, the severall branches of gossiping* dated around 1600.[1] It is a useful source for seeing where contemporaries would expect to find women and depicts groups of them (with some token men) in both the indoor and outdoor places of an anonymous town including in church, the marketplace, public baths, the conduit (some of them fighting), washing clothes in the river, the bake house and the alehouse. It admonishes them and instructs them to get on with their work (Williamson 2014, 141).

Another such study is Elizabeth Cohen's exploration of Rome c1600, which exploits judicial records alongside city regulations and images, to reveal much more of the lived reality for women. In summary, she found them in the streets on errands as well as drawing water, washing clothes in fountains, buying and selling from shops and in markets, begging, watching processions, going to church for services, indulgences and confession and, in the case of sex workers, making use of the permeability of buildings (as in windows and doors) to attract customers from adjacent streets (Cohen 2008, 289-311).

In 2025, Whittle and her team's research on the experience of work in early modern England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, has used quarter session court examinations, church court testimonies and coroners' reports from the north, east and south-west regions of England to analyse the range of individual work tasks undertaken by both women and men in urban and rural settings. In so doing, workspaces are revealed and this research too underlines the importance of outdoor work in doorways, streets and backyards, where men and women could be seen and overheard. Moreover, women can be found working not only in their own homes, but in other people's homes and, as they moved about the city streets undertaking commercial and caregiving work tasks, also from home. Whittle suggests that there is considerable overlap between male and female workspaces and that women and men often worked alongside each other. She states that in early modern England, no clear distinction existed between the private space of a home and its commercial or public space (Whittle, Hailwood, Robb and Aucoin 2025, 119, 122, 127-130).

So, accepting that women were clearly out and about in the streets and sharing public spaces in all their manifestations with men in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, can the presence of women in Exeter be revealed in the same way that it has been for Rome and Norwich using an equivalent range of evidence? It would seem so. Alongside all the activity inherent in running a thriving local economy, Exeter's city council, or Chamber, were keeping up with the ever-increasing civic administrative demands of the Elizabethan era. Amongst the archives is the fragmentary book of *Presentments of Nuisances at the Sessions of the Peace (1554-1588)* which contains summaries of routine misdemeanours from pig keeping to potholes along with fines and punishments. There are approximately 6,000 references, listing 34 different types of offence.

[1] An image can be viewed at https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1973-U-216 [accessed 17 December 2025].

There are also a set of notes referring to around 185 examinations heard before the city's Justices of the Peace between 1559 and 1569 which are set out in the city's fourth *Act Book*. These are not formal court records (none survive in the city archives) but summaries of cases and punishments are interspersed with copies of depositions taken at these trials. Although they deal with similar misdemeanours to those set out in the *Presentments*, there is a greater emphasis on moral offences which might usually have been dealt with in the church courts. However, the Chamber jealously guarded its tight control over the running of the city against the influence of the Cathedral and may have decided that moral offences were their concern as matters affecting the health of civil society (MacCaffrey 1958, 92, 98).

Whittle's research, however, uncovers 35 records referring to Exeter amongst the *Devonshire* church court depositions and quarter session rolls dating between 1560 and 1635. She makes a very important point about depositional evidence; the actions and the places in which they take place may not have been necessarily truthful to the particular case, but they needed to be plausible; in other words, they needed to reflect the real world at large to be taken seriously at the time (Whittle, Hailwood, Robb and Aucoin 2025, 30). This makes them a credible source for current research. Another point worth making is that it is always possible that those being prosecuted were not those who were actually in the places mentioned but others who worked for them. However, in respect of the Exeter *Presentments*, it seems that differentiation was made between individuals and those carrying out activities on their behalf. For example, in 1560 the Grand Jurors reported that it was "Thomas Lambertts servaunts" who were using the city conduit illegally but that it was "John Johnys, goldsmith" who was washing filthy vessels there, not his servants but Jones himself (Presentments, 42).

In amongst all these records are 124 passing references to the public places and spaces in which actions of women and men took place; approximately 38 from the Act Book, 63 from the Presentments and 23 from Whittle's research. The references are often fragmentary and they are too small in number for meaningful statistical analysis. Nor do they allow for analysis of details such as what time of day actions happened in particular spaces or whether men and women more often occupied the same space together rather than separately. This means the results are impressionistic at best but collectively they do suggest that Exeter, like Norwich and Rome, was not gendered in spatial terms and that women and men were living their lives side by side, and on similar terms, more than they were living them apart.

Before looking at the judicial evidence, however, there are a couple of other sources to examine which together suggest that seeing women in the streets was normal, that behaviour in them and the consequences of it applied to both sexes and that togetherness was encouraged. The first are the books of *Homilies* (sermons or exhortations) written in 1547 by Archbishop Thomas Cranmer, of which Exeter men and women would have been well aware. Periodically reprinted, these urged parishioners to behave well and were read out regularly and repeatedly in church. Significantly, the *Homilies* stress togetherness as a positive virtue. Matrimony was supposed to be all about "a perpetuall frendly felowship to bring forth fruit, and to avoyde fornication" (Homilies, 476). Couples were urged to fight the Devil who would endeavour to drive them apart by working hard to "knit their minds together" and by praying for one another (Homilies, 478). Whilst this might not necessarily have resulted in spatial togetherness, it reveals a belief that togetherness was Godly and desirable and seems likely to have encouraged rather than discouraged it.

Moving on from spiritual governance to city governance, there were rules in Exeter specifically governing women's presence and behaviour compiled by John Hooker, the city's Chamberlain, under the heading 'Wyffes and Women'. These address the arguments the wives of Councillors were having about precedence in processions. The result was that when they were seen in public, processing to the Cathedral or elsewhere, they would proceed in strict order according to the 'auncyentie of their housbonds, none presumynge to goe one before the

other contrarye to this order' upon pain of 12d fine. However, the Councillors themselves had also to observe the right order of precedence when attending the mayor in public places (Harte 1947, 906-7, 947). Admittedly, this would only have affected the very few women married to Councillors and therefore at the top of the social scale in the city, but the rules were also concerned with, in practice, the opposite end of the social spectrum; the disappearance from the city of those convicted of "myslyvinge behaviour", presumably detected by concerned neighbours exploiting of the lack of home privacy:

> No manner of women of wch condicon estate or Degree she be of yf she be carted punyshed or banyshed for her lewde & myslyvinge behaviour shall not be pmitted at anye tyme to Dwell wthin this Citie or libties of the same (Harte 1947, 947).

Again, men were banished for the same reason. William Dunn and Alice Sladen were both whipped and banished in 1564, whilst Joan Tomalyn and Gilbert Pearse, both of whom were whipped in 1576 for their incontinent life together, saw Gilbert alone banished for the same (Act Book 4, 268, 351).

As for illustrative material, the only known contemporary pictorial evidence for sixteenth century Exeter is John Hooker's map of c1587.[2] In the earliest known version, the streets are deserted, following conventions of the time. However, by the reprint of 1618, found in the final volume of the *Civitates Orbis Terrarum,* are 30 tiny figures. As far as one can discern, about 13 of these are women, suggesting that it was perceived as normal for them to be out and about in the streets alongside men, even as part of pictorial convention (Oliver 2019, 3-11).

Did everyday reality echo this suggestion of equal visibility and behavioural expectations? The judicial evidence suggests that it did. There are spatial parallels in Exeter with most of the public places in *Tittle-Tattle* and although Exeter did not have public baths, it did have bakehouses, run by both sexes. Women active in the business side of their premises included Joan Redwood, Julian Gunstone and Joan Gater who were all Exeter bakers' widows carrying on their late husbands'occupation, as all three were presented for defaulting on baking fines alongside their male counterparts between 1568 and 1584 (Presentments 209, 221, 311, 378). In Joan Redwood's case her husband John had died in 1581 but her son, also John, achieved his city freedom "apprentice of his father" in 1586, five years after his father's death (Rowe 1973, 100). Exeter records do not normally reveal when husband and wife were joint masters, but it is arguable that it was Joan who was his "master", clearly still practising in 1586 and with a working bakehouse revealed in her household inventory of 1587 (Crocker 2016, 214).

Returning to the *Tittle-Tattle* sites, the Presentments revealed that in Exeter both women and men were fined for running unlicensed tippling houses, wineselling, selling 'naughty ale' and failing to let the aletasters taste their ale before it left their premises between 1555 and 1560 (Presentments, 6, 11, 23, 25, 26, 48). As for the market places, between 1597 and 1610, Whittle found lawful activities in progress, including a Mrs Bawdon setting out her market stall, an unnamed man selling mutton in Butcher Row (the meat market) and Thomas Luscombe coming home from Exeter market (QSRD 4/Box 5, Epiphany 1598, 32; 4/Box 16, Baptist 1610, 11-15, 23-4). The Presentments reveal other men and women, alone and as couples, all undertaking unlawful market trading activities between 1554 and 1586. Alice Lane and her husband John were repeatedly presented for regrating butter and eggs in the market

[2] An illustration is available at https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Exeter,_1563.jpg [accessed 17 December 2025].

place both as individuals and as a couple, as were Martin Barns and his wife in respect of fish. In another very fragmentary entry there appear to have been 58 couples fined for regrating and engrossing (Presentments 3, 46, 69, 117, 203, 376, 369). Both men and women could be found buying and selling in places other than the market place too. Whittle found an unnamed man getting his shoes mended at the cobblers, John Wotten buying a piece of kersey cloth in the Cathedral churchyard and Jane Franie selling silver lace and buttons at Mr Bartlett the goldsmith's shop. At the window of a baker's shop she found Agnes Paul buying bread (QSRD, 4/ Box 16, Michaelmas 1610, 6-7; Epiphany 1611, Exam of John Wotten; Box 32, Epiphany 1630, 49; CCD, Chanter 866, Paule v Buckwell).

Tittle-Tattle also refers to the church. In the 1571 version of the Homilies, references to women are mostly made in the same breath as those made to men and children and there is no differentiation in attitudes and behaviours expected of either; both men and women were forbidden 'excesse', no matter what their condition in life (Homilies, 221). Nevertheless, there is one example of gendered admonishment in respect of failure to attend church due to disillusion with the new protestant regime and its lack of entertaining sights; a woman asks her neighbour what they will now do at church since all the images, singing and organ playing are gone (Homilies, 271). However, of the 24 presentments in Exeter for not attending church, only one is for a women, Widow Miller. The rest are men, for example, "The younge Austen cometh not to his parish church" and "Harry Crocker [who is] levyng suspecyously & comyth not to churche" (Presentments, 11, 22, 295). If women were absent from church, men were too.

The *Presentments* list two wives for illegally washing clothes at the Little Conduit in 1562 (Presentments, 87). However, it was not only women breaking the law at these water fountains. In 1560, both John Jones, goldsmith and William Seldon were fined for washing filthy vessels at the Great Conduit (Presentments, 42). However, it is hard to deny that watery activity does appear to be spatially gendered. The official washing place was 'Lander's Platt' down by the river Exe outside the city walls, which in 1588, was described in a dispute over building a wall as a place where 'person or persons' would wash, bleach and dry their clothes (Act Book 5, 98). Whittle found Agnes Morell alias Wheaten rinsing clothes in "the tail of the mills situate near Exe Bridge", but that ungendered choice of words in the dispute may indicate that it was not solely women that undertook such activity. However, no evidence of men so doing has been found (Whittle, Hailwood, Robb and Aucoin 2025, 110). One watery place in particular was gendered, being used for a special punishment for specific women - those convicted as "scolds". The pond in Southernhay was the venue for the cuckingstool, used to duck them, as Elizabeth Torringe found out in 1562 (Act Book 4, 183). Scolds alone were also punished by being tied to the stern of a boat and dragged down the river – Jane Leader, Elizabeth Efford, Thomasine Short and Joan Petty all suffered this fate on the same day that year (Act Book 4, 187). However, one suspects it was men operating the cuckingstool and rowing the boats.

In Exeter, women are also found in spaces not covered by *Tittle Tattle*. One of these was the city's workhouse. In 1583 Henry Savidge's widow was appointed Governor of the poor women in the House of Correction "to keepe them & seeke to worke" and was provided with her own rooms (Act Book 3, 414). All other recorded overseers were men, and this was a place occupied by both men and women; the criteria for admission was idleness and being without means of living which applied to both genders. Almshouse foundation too reveals only a hint of gendering. Of eleven almshouses in Exeter noted by Hooker, only Palmer's almshouse, founded by John Palmer in 1487, was inhabited alone by poor widows (MacCaffrey 1958, 100-107). All the others, by the later sixteenth century, were lived in by 'poor folks', both individuals and married couples such as Thomas Bending and his wife Ebett who were admitted to the Coomberow Almshouse in 1604 (Act Book 6, 115).

There are also women working in men's houses such as Ede Commin, who in 1560 travelled in from the Somerset market town of Taunton. For two days she worked at Thomas Cooke's house washing dishes and dressing fish. After that she worked at a taylor's house by the West Gate (Presentments, 109). Better still, Whittle found Mary Hole, four men and two boys together "working upon knives" in George's Rase's shop (CCD, Chanter 867, Wast v Rafe).

In addition to glimpses of women in specific places, there are also sightings of both men and women moving around the city streets, sometimes together. Whittle found Alse Allen bringing a pair of hose for mending and Kath Hall delivering a shirt. Also out and about were Samuel Hixt with a message for a midwife and Benjamin Conant delivering a basket of peas (CCD, Chanter 855, John Huntingdon v Katherine Walle, 545v-546; Chanter 867, Edwards v Dodridge, QSRD, 4/Box 32, Epiphany 1630, 53; 4/Box 24, Epiphany 1620, 8). The fourth *Act Book* reveals John Veysey at sundry times carring two bushels of malt from one man's house to another, and in 1560, Joan Moore bringing foodstuffs to another's household (Act Book 4, 98, 126-7). In 1561, Richard Taylor and Joan Smith (with whom he was accused of incontinent living) were seen together "namely he was in company with the said Johan as well in the house of Christopher Bruton and in the high way at Liverydole" (Act Book 4, 115).

Not all street walking had honest intent. Servant Audrey Wall had "at sundry tymes pycked from her master certyn wolle kercheffs & other napery & candles & other stuff & had conveyed the same some to Margery Styke some to Elizabeth Bell & to the wiff of one Holland the mason & also to others" (Act Book 4, 307). Meanwhile, Elizabeth Walcott "was taken for conveinge one pece of beef of the shamells from the standing of Peter Harrys" and Wilmott Knight was "kepte in the guiyldhall from the xxiith of January 1560 unto the xxvth of the same for conveghenge of a bushel of wheton malte […] out of the corne market" (Act Book 4, 93-94). Both men and women were imprisoned there, including John Thorn also in 1560, but Wilmott would have been kept in "a newe prison for women prisoners" having been built at the Guildhall in 1521 (Act Book 1, 90a; Act Book 4, 87). Street theft was not soley the activity of women. Dunes Reynolls and her daughter Agnes walking through the city fair towards the Corn Market saw other women standing by a shop with stolen goods. However, Agnes, later sitting in the corn market upon a stall belonging to another woman, witnessed one of the thieves' husband attempt to carry off the goods, the husband and women apparently working as a team (Presentments, 85).

Also scurrying through the streets was Mrs Stawell along with other women and men who were carting filthy bowls and disposing of other filth over the city walls (Presentments, 30, 187). At night time, Elizabeth Shaply was taken by the watchman at an unlawful hour and put in the cage; a public restraining device by the city gates (Act Book 4, 351, Presentments, 321). I have not found an example of men being so treated, but it is hard to imagine that this was not the case. That being said, there is a hint that women misbehaving in streets was of more concern than men doing so in the case of Ann Carew who was presented for being "a mislyving woman & walker up and down the street and not retayned to no master". Although several young men, listed on the same page, are simply noted as being without a master, their presence in the streets is not referred to (Presentments, 66).

Disorderly shouting in the street was a regular presentment for both men and women, though the term 'scolding' was only applied to women like Robert Grudgeworthy's wife and servant Thomasyn Fursdon who were presented for so doing in the open street (Presentments, 181). Men could be just as bad when it came to verbal conflict; Thomas Marshall "dyd openly in the street betwene the houres of ix and x yn the evenynge sklanderoslye revyld the olde Mistris Tothill calling her bawde Quene wytche & where as also ther & then gave the lyke sklanderose words to Grace Walker calling her by the same terme." (Act Book 4, 176). It could

get a lot worse. John Jones's wife and daughter were presented for fighting in the street, using ungodly words, thrusting the daughter's husband out of the door at night time and beating him up (Presentments, 126). This was not, of course, confined to women; in 1570 William Borne "made assault uppon Hughe Jaxson & drewe blode" (Presentments, 199). Sometimes assault occurred indoors but, given the permeability of houses, became a public event. One such occurance involved both sexes; "Christopher Doble, his weife and John Arthur… playde to cardes at John Crofton's house and the sayde Chrystofer Doble & his wiefe made an assaute uppon the sayde Arthur wth knyves and did drawe bloode" (Presentments, 200). However, I have yet to find a male equivalent to Joan Hockly, who was off to Topsham (the port town near Exeter) "consuming her husband's goods at dancing and leaping amongst mariners to the great slanders of all the citizens" (Presentments, 127).

Sex (heterosexual in these cases) took place indoors and outdoors, and was detectable by others in both spaces. In 1566 Margery Bonet said that Arnold Tunning "had to do wth her.. yn the dytch of Southinhay, as also at one other tyme yn a cloys beyond Exbridge called Parres Closse" (Act Book 4, 297). Elsewhere, William Pinfold was carrying on with prostitute Joan Harton "in a close of ground without Eastgate yn the dytche of the same close" in 1564 (Act Book 4, 266). Alice Tronsfield meanwhile was accused of incontinent living "used with one Thomas Sharke in a stable of his in Rack Lane" (Act Book 4, 69). James Tabb and Ellen Hext, were "taken yn adulterye yn the house of Robert Bagwell" whilst Emma the wife of John Serges "was taken in the chamber of one Sir John Deymon clerke, one of the Vicars Choral.. between the hours of vii and vii at night" (Act Book 4, 10, 303).

Carting and other punishment took place in the open street. Both sexes were subject to the pillory; Elizabeth Trio was "brought to the Guildhall for pykynge of clothes & being punished by the pyllorye for the same att 11 sevrall dayes one aftr an other." (Act Book 4, 124). James Collins was likewise put in the pillory in the open market for two days following an argument about poorly made keys (Act Book 4, 79). Being whipped from pillar to post, or tied to the back of a cart and pulled through the streets, sometimes with a metal basin being beaten to draw attention was the usual punishment meted out to both sexes for incontinent living. Ingram points out that it was a Christian principle that sexual immorality was equally reprehensible in both genders and that moralists at the time attacked the idea of a double standard for men, and perhaps Exeter's justices were mindful of this (Ingram 1987, 154). One Thomas Logan was accused of having two wives and all three were

> […] whipped at the carts tayle yn the open market of the citie … the said Thomas shall receve yn the myddle of the fysh market yn the myddle of butter market yn the meate market yn the whet market yn the malt market at the west gate at the Beare corner at St Peter churche at the east gate at the Lytle conduicte at St Martyn's Lane & the Guyldhall at every of the said places five stryps and the older woman at every of the said place to have five strypes & Margaret Lazzynby [the younger woman] to have of every of the saide place three strypes (Act Book 4, 250).

Alice Tronsfield (again) was carted for sleeping with Roger Blerth after her husband had thrown her out for sexual transgressions. Her husband though was sentenced to beat the basin before them both for 'consenting to' (that is not preventing) her behaviour (Act Book 4, 69). John Gifford was imprisoned and carted for making his servant pregnant and she too was given the same punishment after giving birth (Act Book 4, 138). However, on 19 December 1561 city councillor Richard Sweet was excused "the open shame of the carte used in suche cases" and was instead put in the Guildhall pit (a hole in the ground, still there today) on a diet of bread and water under solitary confinement until he showed remorse, which he did on

January 12th (Act Book 4, 152). Perhaps here is an instance of where social standing counted more than gender.

Richard Sweet's pregnant servant was banished but it was women who judged whether a convicted women was pregnant, a state that could result in a stay of sentence for the time being as John Gifford's servant experienced. A matron jury was the one occasion when Exeter women shared a role with men in the formal judicial process and in the public arena in which it took place, rather than being on the receiving end of it. All of Exeter's civic courts were held in the Guildhall and two matron juries comprising 35 women in total are listed in 1605 and 1609 (Quarter Session Rolls, JI 3, JI 7).

To conclude, for a thriving early modern city, none of the above activities come as any surprise. However, it would seem from these glimpses of spatial information that Exeter's women were highly visible in public places where men were also present, not only living their everyday lives, but also breaking the law and receiving punishment on the same terms as men, making a norm of gender segregation and differentiation difficult to argue. It is true there are examples of places or activity where only one sex is ever mentioned, but they are few in number; Whittle found Mary Mills on a piece of ground in the city picking primroses and Roger Audry taking a couple of hours fishing in the early afternoon (QSRD, 4/Box 5, Easter 1598, 8-9; 4/Box 24, Epiphany 1620, 16). On two occasions, men only are found playing at bowls in Northernhay (a green space outside the city walls) during sermon time (Presentments, 204, 318).

That public togetherness was more likely than separation can be seen in one final example from the built environment. Mary Hurst was the wife of William, a member of one of the city's wealthiest merchant families. Having moved out to a country estate, the family also occupied a town house in Exeter converted from the remains of St Nicholas Priory during the later half of the sixteenth century. They installed a plaster ceiling, still in place today, into which were woven William's and Mary's initials, equal in size and positioning in what would have then been a highly public space within this private dwelling. By happy coincidence, the shapes of capital W and M make a pleasing pattern and it may be this which determined the design. However, it is hard to resist the thought that Mary is here as decoratively as visible as her husband, sharing this public space on equal terms.

William Hurst and Mary Hurst's initials in the parlour ceiling at St Nicholas Priory (© Kate Osborne)

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