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Bells and whistles: listening between the lines in sixteenth-century Exeter

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Abstract

In an attempt to counteract the silence of Exeter's late sixteenth-century cartographic representation and to explore further the idea of urban social relations expressed in auditory terms, this article investigates the issues involved in the ringing of Exeter's civic bells, some of which may reflect a fractious relationship between two sources of authority within the city walls. It sets out some of the challenges to recreating this city's broader sonic identity and outlines the results of initial attempts to do so.

The city of Exeter, in the south-west of England, was the subject of a town plan printed in 1587 and commissioned by John Hooker, the city's chamberlain at the time and its first historian.[1] Sixteenth-century town and city plans aimed to convey the distinct visual identities of urban places to potential visitors and customers who wished to understand more about their defences and commercial and religious sites.[2] The convention of the time was to depict their streets and spaces as entirely deserted – a visual embodiment of harmony and good order, which also resulted in an impression of stillness and silence (Figure 1). The reality of urban life, of course, was very different.

Fortunately, it is possible to augment these visual identities by attempting to recreate accompanying aural identities, or 'soundscapes'. Most sounds will not be immediately obvious from visual material but they would have been all too familiar to

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[1]The Hooker-Hogenburg plan is displayed in the Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery in Exeter. Copies of the map survive in three states: https://rammcollections.org.uk/collections/c2fe680e-7ce2-378f-baf3-0d9085a617a6/, accessed 1 Nov. 2023.

[2]L. Nuti, 'The perspective plan in the sixteenth century: the invention of a representational language', *The Art Bulletin*, 75 (1994), 107. Whilst the market for town plans was growing (the first volume of Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg's *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* appeared in 1572), it is not known why exactly Hooker produced his plan. This particular version has not been associated with any published book although a version of it does appear in the sixth volume of *Civitates*, published in 1618, and it may have been a 'vanity project' concerned with local prestige; R. Oliver and R. Kain, 'Seven maps of Exeter – John Hooker's map, 1587', in R. Oliver, R. Kain and T. Gray (eds.), *William Birchynshaw's Map of Exeter 1743* (Woodbridge, 2019), 6.
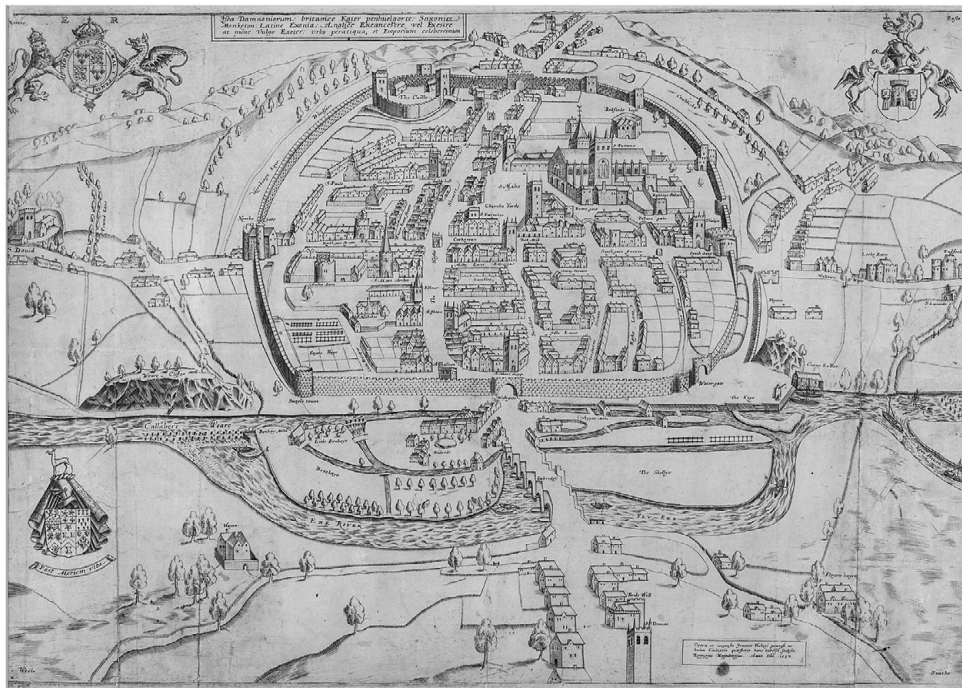
Figure 1. The Hooker-Hogenburg map/plan of Exeter/Isca Damnoniorum, © The Royal Albert Memorial Museum & Art Gallery, Exeter City Council.

their inhabitants and an important part of their experience of urban life. The experiential turn is still developing in the field of early modern urban history, but soundscape research within this field runs from, for example, Bruce Smith's *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England*, published in 1999 to the 2015 international conference proceedings that resulted in *Hearing the City in Early Modern Europe*.[3] However, Smith, in his 2019 presentation on sound studies to the Early Modern Soundscapes Project, still regards as pivotal the analytical work of R. Murray Schafer who coined the word 'soundscape' in 1977 and framed the concept with three key elements – keynotes, signals and soundmarks. In summary, keynotes are created by geography and climate: water, wind, forests, plains, birds, insects and animals. They 'do not have to be listened to consciously; they are overheard but cannot be overlooked' and they provide an acoustic contrast or ground for signals and soundmarks. Signals are foreground sounds listened to consciously such as bells, whistles, horns and sirens, whilst soundmarks are sounds which make the acoustic life of a community unique.[4] The last two elements mean that urban soundscape recreation includes identifying where sound is created not only from usage of the material culture *of* public spaces – walls, bells and street furniture for example – but also of material culture *used in* public spaces, such as armour and musical instruments. The result will be a mixture of deliberate and incidental sounds, some common to many urban places, others unique to individual ones.

Initial attempts to recreate a late sixteenth-century urban soundscape for Exeter (focusing in this instance on outdoor public spaces) has had its challenges. Its location at the head of the Exe Estuary enabled this city to thrive commercially and by the 1520s it had become the fifth largest provincial capital/port in England in terms of taxable wealth.[5] By the later sixteenth century, it housed approximately 8,000–10,000 inhabitants.[6] What underpinned this expansion was the development of a combination of local, inland, coastal, capital and continental import and export trade.[7] Mostly concerned with woollen cloth, it dealt increasingly in luxury goods and alongside this developed wholesale and retail trade with its accompanying craftspeople and professionals. Most of its inhabitants and activities were housed more or less within a physical space of just over one third of a square kilometre surrounded by Roman city walls. It may have been modest in comparison with London (containing around 200,000 people by comparison), but the bald figures suggest an overall densely populated footprint that was anything but silent. It was also, as we shall see, the locus

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[3] B.R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O Factor* (Chicago, 1999); T. Knighton and A. Mazuela-Anguita (eds.), *Hearing the City in Early Modern Europe* (Turnhout, 2018). In addition, auditory experience is included in the remit of the annual interdisciplinary *Early Modern Sensory Experiences* conference, hosted by the University of Oxford and The Open University: www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/medieval-and-early-modern-research/sensory-experiences, accessed 21 Feb. 2023.

[4] B.R. Smith, 'What is (are?) Sound Studies and what shape is it (are they?) in now?', presentation to the Early Modern Soundscapes Project, 21 Mar. 2019, https://emsoundscapes.co.uk/seminars/, accessed 15 May 2022; R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Vermont, 1977), 9–10.

[5] W.G. Hoskins, *Provincial England* (London, 1965), 70–1.

[6] J. Allan, N. Alcock and D. Dawson (eds.), *West Country Households 1500–1700* (Woodbridge, 2015), 45.

[7] W.T. MacCaffrey, *Exeter 1540–1640* (London, 1958), 160–73; J. Allan, *Medieval & Post-Medieval Finds from Exeter 1971–1980* (Exeter, 1984), 355–6. See also M. Kowaleski, *Local Markets and Regional Trade in Medieval Exeter* (Cambridge, 1995).

of a long-standing spatial jurisdictional conflict between its civic and cathedral authorities and a city with aspirations to imitate the great metropolis itself.

Taking Schafer's framework as a starting point, a small database was compiled of Exeter sounds which would have penetrated outdoor public space. These have been inferred from uses made both of voice (proclamation making for example) and of material culture found in contemporary documents, such as anvil hammering, window demolition, filth shovelling, shop board erection and street sweeping.[8] There are two key points to be made here. First, reference to sound is not common. It has turned out to be a case not so much of reading between the lines as listening between them, because only occasionally is sound or noise *directly* referred to – there are few 'earwitnesses' as Schafer would say.[9] Take for example the 'Presentments of Nuisances to the Sessions of the Peace' for Exeter listed between 1550 and 1588. In this particular (and fragmentary) source, sound is rarely expressly mentioned as a direct irritant to Exeter's inhabitants. The main occasions are in connection with vocal activity, specifically women scolding in the street and fights sufficiently vicious to draw blood. On one occasion, 'Elyanor Foynnte Cecyly Ablemely & Elyzabeth Collyns [were presented] for skoldynge & raylyng one wth the other att the tyme of evenynge preye'.[10] Clearly, their fellow parishioners were disturbed not only by the timing of this outburst when its protagonists should themselves have been at prayer but presumably at the aural interruption of their own meditations. Other instances of shouting and brawling are described as being contrary to 'the quene's majesties peace'. Given that these are presentments to a court, this refers to peace as opposed to disorder; the disorderly behaviour (especially by women) is the nuisance, the greater concern, the noise created by it is merely an annoying symptom, although one imagines that peace in the sense of quietness was also to be welcomed by the neighbours. Hannes Kleineke identifies examples of specific noise pollution from the century before, including complaints about endless church bellringing for the souls of the dead, and indeed even Exeter's Bishop Grandison grumbled about it in 1339.[11] However, only very occasionally is noise pollution mentioned in surviving documents from the later sixteenth century.

Second, is the point made by Smith that early modern urban spaces lacked the constant noise of motor vehicles, air conditioning and the like with their broad frequency bands. He postulates that occupants would therefore have heard many more quieter sounds, sounds from further away and the details of sounds.[12] This makes Exeter a contrasting case-study to larger cities because it seems likely that distinct sounds would have bled into, and resonated across, its relatively small

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[8]The database was compiled from references in the city act books, household inventories, receiver's accounts, mayor's court rolls, rentals, leases and other property transaction documents housed in the Devon Heritage Centre (DHC) Exeter City Archives (ECA). Many come from John Hooker's 'Description' which compiles rules and regulations for city administration and management; W.J. Harte, J.W. Schopp and H. Tapley-Soper (eds.) *The Description of the Citie of Excester* (Exeter, 1947).

[9]Schafer, *Soundscape*, 8.

[10]DHC/ECA, Presentments of Nuisances to the Sessions of the Peace, Book 100, 214.

[11]H. Kleineke, 'Civic ritual, space and conflict in fifteenth-century Exeter', in F. Andrews (ed.), *Ritual and Space in the Middle Ages: Proceedings of the 2009 Harlaxton Symposium*, Harlaxton Medieval Studies, 21 (Donington, 2011), 175. The source here is a letter of John Shillingford, the mayor of Exeter 1447–50; H.B. Walters, *Church Bells of England* (Oxford, 1912; reprinted 1977), 161.

[12]Smith, *The Acoustic World*, 50–1.

footprint, making it difficult to distinguish clear geographical zones of noise within its walls. This might also have been reinforced by the apparently largely undifferentiated occupational cityscape. It is not possible in Exeter to reconstruct patterns of households and occupations plot by plot as it is, for example, in Winchester, Hull or Alnwick.[13] Consequently, it is difficult to outline precisely occupational zones within the city walls. The most that can be achieved, through a parish allocation of occupational references, is a broad pattern of what might be regarded as 'noisier' workshop-type pursuits (carpenters, coopers, etc.) being more numerous in entirely or partially extra-mural parishes. However, this analysis is reliant on serendipitous survival of evidence and can be challenged by the one piece of quasi-systematic compilation: the parish registers of Holy Trinity. A parish neither particularly wealthy nor impoverished, embracing land both within and without the city wall, its parsons recorded more assiduously than usual the occupations of their flock between 1564 and 1610.[14] This reveals (assuming the occupation was practised within the household) a wide range of activity existing cheek-by-jowl: crafting workshops, inns, medics, bakers, merchants, lawyers, clothworkers and the majority of masons, presumably working on the adjacent cathedral.

Nevertheless, even with a possibly acoustically undifferentiated soundscape and only oblique references to sound, it is possible to identify a selection of sound types from contemporary documents which together hint at a sonic identity for Exeter. I will not rehearse here the whole range of everyday sounds which would have been experienced in urban settings around the world – chatter, marketplace, building work and so on, crucial though these are to reconstructing a full soundscape – but will highlight what I would argue is a distinguishing *combination* of Schafer's signals, soundmarks and keynotes, where there is particular detail to be found in the archives, even if individual sounds are not themselves unique to Exeter. One 'signal' in particular stands out; Exeter's civic bells were one of the most frequently referenced sounds. By drawing together disparate references to curfew bellringing, it is possible to suggest that sound appropriation tactics were playing out in a way that made audible a fractious relationship between the city council, or chamber and the cathedral.

Exeter's curfew bells

By the start of Elizabeth I's reign in 1558, Exeter's inhabitants were well aware that bellringing was a contestable voice of authority. In 1549, shock tactics had been employed in rural parishes surrounding the city when church bells were almost totally silenced by the crown as punishment for participation in the Western Rising that summer. Their crimes included having rung their bells, reputedly backwards

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[13]K. Osborne, 'Illuminating the chorus in the shadows: Elizabethan and Jacobean Exeter 1550–1610', Exeter University Ph.D. thesis, 2016, 272–97; D. Keene, *Survey of Medieval Winchester* (Oxford, 1985); R. Horrox, *The Changing Plan of Hull 1290–1650: A Guide to the Sources of the Early Topography of Hull* (Kingston upon Hull, 1978); M.R.G. Conzen, *Alnwick, Northumberland: A Study in Town-Plan Analysis* (London, 1960).

[14]The Rev. F. Nesbit (ed.), 'Exeter: Holy Trinity parish register burials, 1563–1729', 'baptisms 1563–1711' and 'marriages and banns 1573–1754', unpublished manuscripts in DHC, 1930–1.

(low to high notes) to raise rebellion in the face of religious change across the counties of Devon and Cornwall.[15]

The Reformation too had made its mark, though it is not my intention to cover the full story of its impact on Exeter's bells here, as more research is required to shed light on the details for this city. In outline, however, the first jolt was the silencing of bells belonging to religious houses in and around the city, all of which were dissolved by 1539.[16] Second, came the reduction by order of Edward VI both in the number of operable church and cathedral bells from 75 to 33 and the occasions on which they could be rung arising from liturgical change and crown cash shortages.[17] It would seem that, generally, smaller bells (the sanctus and sacring bells used at key points in the mass) and hand bells (housling bells used to announce the on-foot administration of the holy sacrament to a sick or dying person and those used in funeral processions to summon prayers for the dead) were the main victims and indeed, in Exeter, the majority of bells marked out for decommissioning were the smaller amongst its tower and turret bells.[18] In terms of religious ringing, royal injunctions banning or reducing bellringing may not always have been followed to the letter if the issuing of articles investigating 'superstitious ringing' into the 1570s in other dioceses is anything to go by, and the net result for Exeter too may well have been that the sound of church bells was considerably thinned out but certainly not silenced.[19]

Perhaps at least as significant accoustically for Exonians was disruption in respect of the morning bell and evening curfew – the secular rings which governed everyone's working day. The law of curfew had been imposed by William the Conqueror in 1068. It was abolished in 1100 but the custom continued, providing an authoritative aural boundary between the working day and the opening of gates, announced at four or five in the morning, and gate closure and sleep at night, announced at nine in the evening.[20] Such bells mattered; for example, in the aftermath of the Western Rising, the Exeter Tailors' Guild rules for its apprentices stated they were not to leave their master's house after the ringing of the bell unless they were carrying a light, nor in the morning before the bell was rung.[21]

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[15]N. Pocock (ed.), *Troubles Connected with The Prayer Book of 1549* (London, 1884), 73; W. Cotton and H. Woollcombe, *Gleanings from the Municipal and Cathedral Records relative to the History of the City of Exeter* (Exeter, 1877), 191; M. Stoyle, *A Murderous Midsummer: The Western Rising of 1549* (London, 2022), 63, 132; C. Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010), 463. Well beyond living memory, bellringing had been contested between the cathedral and St Nicholas Priory in the eleventh century, when the former refused permission to the latter to ring its church bells. Two papal interventions and enforcement by the archbishop of Canterbury were needed before the bells rang out in about 1100–02; N. Orme, *The Churches of Medieval Exeter* (Exeter, 2014), 145.

[16]J. Youings, 'The city of Exeter and the property of the dissolved monasteries', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 84 (1952), 129.

[17]B.F. Cresswell, *The Edwardian Inventories for the City and County of Exeter* (London, 1916). These numbers are taken from inventories resulting from commissions intent on removing bells for the king's financial benefit. Bells, however, could be removed and sold to benefit the parish ahead of visitations, so it may be that the numerical reduction was greater; Stoyle, *A Murderous Midsummer*, 56.

[18]Marsh, *Music and Society*, 467; Walters, *Church Bells*, 123, 153, 160.

[19]W.H. Frere, *Visitation Articles and Injunctions 1559–1575*, vol. III (London, 2018), 256, 344, 383; R.A. Hill, 'The reformation of the bells in early modern England', Simon Fraser University, Ph.D. thesis, 2012, 167–9.

[20]Walters, *Church Bells*, 142–3 and 146.

[21]P. Williams, 'The trading community of Exeter 1470–1570 with special reference to merchants and tailors', Exeter University Ph.D. thesis, 2020, vol. I, 214.

It is not entirely clear which bell rang the morning and evening curfew in Exeter. The immediate assumption might be that it would come from a choice of civic bells atop the guildhall, the headquarters of the chamber. Here was to be found a bellcote which appears to have housed two bells – the 'Great bell' and the 'Common bell'.[22] These bells were likely to have been, relatively speaking, on the smaller side. The 1552 Church Goods Commission inventories reveal that in Exeter, church bells hung in bellcotes and turrets weighed only 1 cwt (hundredweight) when tower hung bells were between 4 and 14 cwt.[23] That is not to say they could not be heard across the city without modern background hum; the bell still hanging in the bellcote of St Pancras church is inscribed 'Though I am small I am heard over wide fields.'

However, it may be that the chamber desired something bigger and much more authoritative – and something that could be heard over any other bells ringing. In the city act book covering March 1517, the 'cite is bell' was being delivered to Councillor Thomas Hunte who was to pay 23*s* 4*d* for every hundredweight if it was of 'good of sowne and ryngyng'.[24] The fact that its weight was anticipated as being calculable in more than one hundredweight suggests that it was not one of the smaller guildhall bellcote bells. Evidence for a candidate for this 1517 bell comes from the 1552 commission visitation inventories for St Mary Major (depicted as 'St Mari' in the centre of Hooker's plan, but since demolished). This found: 'The Bells. Item 5 bells great and small whereof one serveth for the city's use and the others to the parish use.' The outcome of the visitation was that the visitors 'left in ye saide parish church…tow bells ye one to serve the citie & being of xiiii c waight by estimacion, the oyr to serve ye churche and being x c waight by estimacion'.[25] The bell for the city's use was the largest after those in the cathedral.

The church goods inventory seems to imply that in 1552 the city *had used and would still be using* their bell, but *exactly* for what purpose is not stated. The cathedral had certainly rung the curfew in earlier centuries.[26] It is possible this was primarily for the benefit of those living in the enclosed Cathedral Close which had its own gates to open and shut and which had reason to want to make clear its own authority in this part of the city, discussed below. But, if rung on a sizeable bell, it would have been heard over and above the Close walls. However, the city act book covering 1562 reveals that in that year order was made that a morning and curfew bell at St Mary the More (another name for St Mary Major) should start up in imitation of London practice:

> For the sundrye & manye comodyties aswell to the artyficers and inhabytaunts of this citie and to the great compforte of all straunges & travellors to & from this Citie especyally in the tyme of wynter. It is therefore ordered that as in the Citie of London so also yn this Citie of Exon there shalbe one Bell ronge everye mornynge & evry evenige yn the p[ar]ishe of St Marye the More. That ys to weete one whole quartr of an hower at iiii of the Clock in the mornynge from

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[22]S. Blaylock, 'Exeter guildhall', *Devon Archaeological Society Proceedings*, 48 (1990), 125–6; H. Lloyd Parry, *The History of the Exeter Guildhall and the Life Within* (Exeter, 1936), 14. In 1456, expenditure was made on a new bellframe and the bell repaired. In 1463, a new bell was purchased. In 1484–85, the bellcote or turret was rebuilt for the 'Great bell' but a 'Common bell' is also mentioned in the same accounts.

[23]Cresswell, *Edwardian Inventories.*

[24]DHC/ECA/Act Book 2, 48.

[25]Cresswell, *Edwardian Inventories*, 55 and 57.

[26]N. Orme, *Exeter Cathedral: The First Thousand Years 400–1550* (Exeter, 2009), 152.

whyte sondaye untill Septembr and at all other tymes at fyve of the clocke of the mornynge: And lykewyse yn everye evenynge to ringe the sayde bell the lyke tyme at 9 of the clock.[27]

Taken at face value, it would seem that this was an entirely new practice. But knowing that the city already controlled the largest tower bell in this church, and had done for some time, it can also be read that this was an order confirming or perhaps formalizing existing operations including specific imitation of London's civic rings. Since the time of Henry I, Exeter's citizens had claimed to have 'all liberties and free customs which the citizens of London have'. Its aldermen, sub-sheriffs and chamberlain enjoyed the same powers and jurisdiction as their London equivalents and civic schemes such as the Orphans' Court were administered along the same lines as those in the metropolis.[28] Bellringing in London fashion can therefore be seen as an audible dimension to this long-standing imitation of England's most prestigious urban centre. Moreover, the order was secured by clear civic responsibility for organizing and financing it at a cost of 40*s* or £2 per annum.[29]

It can also be argued that this new or renewed civic curfew, using the greatest church bell in the largest church, with the most imposing tower which happened to be immediately adjacent to the cathedral, is evidence for the chamber asserting its own sonic authority, possibly in competition with the cathedral if it continued to ring its own curfew. The context for suggesting this is the ongoing friction between the city and the cathedral. The long-standing bone of contention was the extent of the city's jurisdiction within the Bishop's Fee (lands comprising tenements within and without the city walls, including around a quarter of the city footprint) and in respect of streets within the Cathedral Close but without its churchyard. Arguments even spilled over into physical scuffles disrupting processions which, by their nature, involved the visual representation of the rival authorities of both parties.[30] By the mid-fifteenth century, the cathedral had secured the dominant position over the Bishop's Fee and churchyard and largely curtailed attempts by the city to oust the bishop's authority there. However, in the 1530s, Exeter was made both a city and a county with its own justices of the peace and in 1549 the boundaries of the new county were settled and included the Bishop's Fee.[31] Even though the bishop's privileges were preserved, the cathedral was not going to retreat gracefully. Across the 1560s, there is evidence for arbitration still being required to settle 'the varyaunce and debate' concerning the bounds of the Bishop's Fee and the churchyard, and the arguments carried on into the 1590s and beyond.[32] It seems, though, that the city had the upper hand from 1549 onwards and perhaps its appropriation of the morning and evening bells as the daily authoritative 'voice' was a way of audibly commandeering public space – in this case,

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[27]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 929.

[28]*Ibid.*, 331, 351, 429, 433, 437, 771–81.

[29]*Ibid.*, 930; J. Youings, *Early Tudor Exeter: The Founders of the County of the City: An Inaugural Lecture Delivered in the University of Exeter on 1 March 1974* (Exeter, 1974), 12.

[30]Kleineke, 'Civic ritual, space and conflict', 171–4. Kleineke points out that Exeter was not unique in this respect, citing Bristol, Hereford, Norwich, Shrewsbury and York as having similar spatial disputes between civic and religious authorities.

[31]M.E. Curtis, *Some Disputes between the City and the Cathedral Authorities of Exeter* (Exeter, 1932), 41–5.

[32]*Ibid.*, 46–54.

the whole city including Cathedral Close – using one of the largest pieces of material culture around, a 14 cwt bell.

In this instance, however, bad luck for the chamber turned the tables. In 1564, just two years after instigating the morning and curfew rings, the bell was broken and it seems the cathedral had the city over a barrel. It agreed to ring its 30 cwt Stafford Bell, but at twice the price – £4 per annum – perhaps not surprisingly given that having once been one of the wealthiest pre-Reformation foundations it was now amongst the poorest. The city passed the cost directly onto the city's parishioners.[33] It may have been that this was a reluctant temporary solution for the chamber until the bell could be recast and it could reappropriate the curfew bells. Unfortunately for the chamber, it may also have been that two years (at least) of daily ringing caused structural problems for St Mary Major's 500-year-old tower. After all, it was a 14 cwt bell which, being rung on a half-wheel, would create major impulsive forces on the tower walls.[34] On 18 August 1568, the chamber noted that it was 'yn decay & ruynes' and was soon likely to fall down. They agreed that a fifteenths and tenths tax levied in the next two years would raise £60 to finance a solution.[35] Presumably, then a recast bell could be safely rung once more.

Meanwhile, trouble was brewing at the cathedral. In 1579, the chamber noted that the cathedral was not ringing the curfew bell as agreed because the ringers felt the stipend too small and in any case it was not being paid as agreed.[36] There may have been an an issue with the cathedral's ringers as far back as 1566 when St Petrock's church had to supply a bellringer for the cathedral.[37] After that, every year between 1567 and 1579 (notwithstanding the odd missing year due to document damage) St Petrock's churchwardens paid a bellringer 8s for ringing their own 'Bow Bell', the curfew bell named after the Bow Bell rung for the same purpose in London.[38] Not only that, but the 'Boo Bell' was mended at St Petrock's expense in 1568, and at the mayor's commandment too.[39] By 1577, the churchwarden even had to pay 'the brasier for new casting the greate Bell and setting him up'.[40] As Hooker's plan shows, St Petrock backed onto Cathedral Close, was adjacent to St Mary Major, was the most centrally placed of all the city churches and was also near to the guildhall; it would have made a good third choice of bell location, even if the largest operable bell that might have survived the Reformation in this church was only 4 cwt in comparison.[41]

Whether the chamber contributed to St Petrock's expenses in so ringing (there is nothing noted under receipts in the churchwarden's accounts) or whether the churchwardens protested about this duty is not known, but it was clear in 1579 that the chamber had to up its game. It agreed to increase the cathedral bellringing stipend

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[33]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 930.

[34]R. Johnson, 'A most public of musical performances: the English art of change-ringing', *Geo Journal*, 65 (2006), 19. Johnson calculates that a 1 cwt bell generates 2.5 cwt, then 4.25 cwt then 2.5 cwt of force within a four-second ring on a half-wheel mechanism. If the frame on which a bell hangs is not ridged and stable then it can act as a battering ram on the tower wall.

[35]DHC/ECA/Act Book 3, 211.

[36]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 930.

[37]DHC, St Petrock's Churchwarden's Accounts PW1, 130.

[38]*Ibid.*, 132–9; Walters, *Church Bells*, 147.

[39]DHC/St Petrock/PW1, 132.

[40]*Ibid.*, 139 and 141.

[41]Cresswell, *Edwardian Inventories*, 74.

to £5 6s 8d per annum. This time, the ever increasing costs were levied on both parishes and the guilds and companies operating within Exeter; the Merchants, Tailors, Tuckers and Skinners for example.[42]

It was necessary to have someone ringing in 1579 as, 12 years on, the St Mary Major tower continued to crumble. By 1581, the churchwardens and parishioners were pleading for permission to demolish and rebuild.[43] Work may have been delayed because that year the chamber put forward a parliamentary bill proposing the consolidation of the city parishes into five or six, each with an enlarged church under the chamber's own patronage – surely yet another act of assertiveness at the expense of the cathedral's authority. The cathedral opposed it and the bill failed.[44] So, in 1581 work at last started and Thomas Hampton the churchwarden recorded his expenditure meticulously, which included mending three bells and their furniture and trussing the 'greate bell'.[45] Careful scrutiny of Hooker's plan reveals the faint remains of the erased lines which formerly depicted the steeple.

Hampton's account also states that the cathedral bell was rung and paid for by parish contributions of 4s per annum. So, did all this expenditure and amendment restore the morning and evening bells at St Mary Major? Yes, possibly, because over the following years, until around 1587, the city receiver's accounts reveal extraordinary payments for ringing the bow bell and for its repair, although it does not state exactly where this bell was. It may be significant that at this point, ringing the St Petrock Bow Bell tailed off over the years between 1580 and 1584 although the accounts are so badly damaged it is frustratingly impossible to know if and when ringing there finally ceased.[46]

If St Mary Major was used, something else went wrong, for in November 1587 the cathedral agreed once again that it would at the request of the mayor ring the Stafford Bell at morning and evening for £5 6s 8d per annum. This would, as before, be paid for by the parishioners from across the city.[47] Did this happen? It is possible it did not, or at least not for very long, because in January 1591 the chamber ordered that St Lawrence parish church would 'ringe ther greate bell for a curffoy bell in the morninge & eveninge' and that four other parishes would pay them to do this. The same applied to three other parish churches; St Petrock once again and St Mary Steps and Holy Trinity would ring on other parishes' behalf – but not St Mary Major. The churches were vaguely geographically grouped, but not entirely, as Hooker's plan shows; St John, covered by the St Lawrence bell, was at the opposite end of the High Street from St Lawrence. St Kerrian was not even mentioned although it had a small

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[42]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 930–1. See also DHC/ECA, Receiver's Account Roll 21–2 Eliz and 22–3 Eliz where a payment was made to Symon Blackmore for mending the morning bell at St Peters for 2s, and the following year another for mending the clapper of the bow bell.

[43]DHC, St Mary Major Churchwarden's Accounts PW1, 22–3.

[44]MacCaffrey, *Exeter 1540–1640*, 196–7. The chamber tried again in 1601, this time proposing to suppress six parishes and replace them by a single parish with a new and larger church, again in the patronage of the chamber. This too failed but it is hard not to interpret these proposals as both visible and sonic attempts to square up to the cathedral's religious authority within the city walls.

[45]DHC/St Mary Major/PW1, 26.

[46]DHC/St Petrock/PW1, 144–8.

[47]DHC/ECA/Act Book 4, 526–30.

bell in a turret of its own.[48] There are no payments in the receiver's accounts for bellringing at this time.

Sonic overlap would certainly have occurred in such a small footprint as sixteenth-century Exeter but perhaps by now that would not have mattered. The morning and evening bells had moved from St Mary Major to the cathedral, to St Petrock, then back to the cathedral, then (possibly) back to St Mary Major, then returned again to the cathedral. Now with the ring split between several smaller bells across the city, it was both spatially and sonically different and possibly just as effective as one great bell and perhaps politically more acceptable to the chamber than having the cathedral ring it. It was also much cheaper, as the parishioners would collectively pay just £2 16*s* each year. What is not clear is whether the cathedral continued to ring its own curfew as it had done before the city paid it to do so on its behalf and in competition with the parish-commandeered bells, or how long this spatially distributed ring lasted. What is known is that during the last couple of years of Elizabeth's reign, the chamber only paid to toll sermon bells and once James I acceded to the throne, there is no further mention of sermon or curfew bellringing in the accounts. It seems the chamber gave up the fight and the cathedral had the last laugh – it certainly rang the curfew in 1850 and still rings it today.[49]

In respect of bellringing appropriation, Exeter is not a lone example and makes for a contrasting case-study with continental cities. There are similarities with (though not identical to, and certainly less violent than) those in medieval Florence outlined by Niall Atkinson in his work highlighting a key *function* of soundscape. He describes the Florentine soundscape as being 'as much an expression of its identity as it was a medium through which social relations were forged and negotiated by both ritual and transgressive practices'.[50] He reveals that the Florentine government's bellringing was timed to avoid clashes with established religious ringing, orchestrating 'a rhythmic harmony between church and state'.[51] So when, during the *Ciompi* revolt in 1378, church bells in peripheral neighbourhoods were rung by the wrong people (wool-worker revolutionaries co-ordinating their movements) at the wrong time, and disrupted sonically the rhythm of the day and political/religious harmony, the punishment that followed was severe.[52] A variation on this theme occurred a century later when in 1498, Florence's Piagnona bell was seized as a weapon from the church of San Marco by the government. Previously rung by reforming preacher Girolama Savonarola to call his followers, it also rang in his defence when his authority collapsed. Consequently, its clapper was removed, put on trial, whipped through the streets and banished beyond the city walls.[53]

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[48]DHC/ECA/Act Book 5, 180.

[49]Anon., *Devon & Cornwall Notes and Queries*, 50, 12 Oct. 1850; The Rev. J.G.M. Scott, *The Bells of Exeter Cathedral* (Exeter, 2019), 6.

[50]N. Atkinson, 'Seeing sound: mapping the Florentine landscape', in N. Terpstra and C. Rose (eds.), *Mapping Space, Sense and Movement in Florence: Historical GIS and the Early Modern City* (London, 2016), 149.

[51]*Ibid.*, 160.

[52]*Ibid.*, 162; N. Atkinson, 'They rang the bells at the wrong time', in F. Nevola and D. Rosenthal (eds.), *Urban Communities in Early Modern Europe (1400–1700): A Research Review*, http://earlymoderncommunities.org, accessed 14 May 2022.

[53]D.M. Zolli and C. Brown, 'Bell on trial: the struggle for sound after Savonarola', *Renaissance Quarterly*, 72 (2019), 54–96.

So, the desire to control (or even eliminate) sound may lead to its appropriation. In Florence, this was carried out by the revolutionaries who claimed the authoritative, legitimizing 'voice' of bells as their own, by Savonarola for his cause and ultimately the Florentine government in revenge. In Exeter, it would seem the chamber attempted appropriation of the curfew ring in order not just to align aurally its identity with London – the ultimate in urban sophistication and authority – but also to be seen *and heard* as the top authority within the city walls. Whether the cathedral merely helped out in times of difficulty (though at a price) or deliberately took every opportunity to reappropriate the curfew ring back into its control is a moot point. However one interprets the situation, it would appear that social bonds were not so much forged as undermined at executive level and, along the way, this created a certain degree of everyday sonic disorder for Exeter's citizens.

The wider soundscape

Auditory authority was at the heart of the above bellringing-related arguments and it is almost possible to hear the curfew bells resonating around Exeter's streets from different locations as the chamber struggled to keep control of their ringing. On this occasion, the story is unusually well documented. Usually, however, this is not the case and, returning to the attempts to recreate a soundscape of public spaces in late sixteenth-century Exeter, all elements of Schafer's framework of keynotes, signals and soundmarks need careful teasing out of documentary evidence.

Signals: voices, music, street theatre

Signals are, like the curfew bells, deliberately controlled sounds meant to be listened to consciously, and those making use of the material culture of public spaces transform the purpose of those spaces. As we have seen, shouting in the street was considered disorderly but particular individuals were given official leave to signal by oral means here, turning their high-walled, enclosed routes (off which, presumably, sound would bounce) into a kind of promenading theatrical news channel, celebrity promotion and alarm clock. For example, the town crier, or sometimes sergeants, attended the mayor when making proclamations.[54] There was a proper performance procedure for this: once all 24 city councillors had gathered with the mayor, the crier or sergeant made three *oyes* and commanded every man to keep silence. He then pronounced the proclamation with a low voice before the clerk read it and then pinned it to the gates.[55] The bellmen also made proclamations throughout the city, about lost items, games and pastimes and walked the streets with handbells at night, calling to warn inhabitants to beware of fires and candlelight.[56] Absent from the sources, though, are the street balladeers. They do not appear in the 'Presentments' nor in documents relating to city operations, though if present, they would undoubtedly have added to the theatrical soundscape of news and gossip.

There were others too who had official leave to roam the streets signalling audibly on specific occasions; these were the waits – the city-sponsored musicians – playing

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[54]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 822.
[55]*Ibid.*, 804, 846.
[56]*Ibid.*, 822; DHC/ECA/Act Book 5, 258–9.

wind instruments. Their ensemble in 1575 consisted of several double reed instruments; a double curtall (contra bassoon), two tenor oboes (Cor Anglais) and one treble oboe (oboe) plus a set of four recorders, a lyserden and a cornet.[57] Recordings of reproduction instruments reveal their penetrating sound.[58] From November to February they were supposed to play through the streets of the whole city from three o'clock in the morning except on Fridays, Sundays and holidays to get people out of bed, even, it would seem, before the morning bell. On Christmas day they played at all the councillors' houses (presumably in competition with church bells) and on election day they trooped throughout the city once again, this time encouraging freemen to vote – with the proceedings additionally announced by a blow on the horn.[59] The waits also accompanied the mayor and councillors when they processed in and out of the cathedral, aurally enhancing their visual importance – and perhaps contributing to the animosity discussed earlier.[60] But on very rare days when monarchs, or those considered to be their representatives, arrived, the street theatre went into overdrive. The chief citizens rustled to the South Gate in their scarlet gowns to greet their visitor. A congratulatory speech was made and the city cannon were fired – an exceptional signal indeed.[61]

In stark contrast, it was also along the main streets that soundmark 'rough music' rang in the inhabitants' ears. This was when carting took place; when men and women were either thrust into or tied to the back of a cart and pulled around the main streets of the city as a form of humiliation. Sometimes, if their conviction was for adultery, the husband walked in front of the cart beating a metal basin to make quite sure everyone looked up and took note.[62]

Other sources of late sixteenth-century secular dramatic sound were interludes or lighthearted plays performed in Exeter by increasingly large companies as the century progressed. Though viewed by a privileged few in the guildhall, their sounds may have bled into the street. Gradually, however, these were curtailed as puritanism gained a stronger grip. In 1606, those players that at least managed to gain the mayor's permission to perform were not to do so after five o'clock in the winter months or 6 o'clock in the summer. From 1616 onwards, they were largely paid to go away.[63]

Soundmarks: hammers, armour, bonfires and bears

Not all sounds were signals deliberately making use of public space to command attention. Others penetrated public spaces but were incidental, arising from the use of material culture. Nevertheless, they must still have made a distinct contribution to the soundscape.

The largest pieces of such material culture lay downhill and just outside the city walls by the riverside where were located the corn mills and tucking or fulling mills. Tucking mills possessed great water-driven wooden hammers with which to pound

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[57]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 945–6.

[58]http://piva.org.uk, accessed 14 May 2022.

[59]Kleineke, 'Civic ritual, space and conflict', 170; Lloyd Parry, *Exeter Guildhall*, 40–1.

[60]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 945–6; Lloyd Parry, *Exeter Guildhall*, 66–7.

[61]M. Stoyle, *Circled with Stone: Exeter's City Walls 1485–1660* (Exeter, 2003), 40; MacCaffrey, *Exeter 1540–1640*, 208.

[62]DHC/ECA/Act Book 4, 19 and 69.

[63]Lloyd Parry, *Exeter Guildhall*, 64–6, 99–101.

woollen cloth to felt it, a key process in Exeter's major cloth finishing industry.[64] The hammers made a rhythmic working-day thumping noise, or at least they did when the river flow was sufficient to drive them. The sound, emitted by some of the largest pieces of material culture around, must have provided a kind of early factory hooter equivalent because their operational times were specified. It may well have been partly for noise that the tucking mills were not to be set going before six o'clock in the morning or kept at work after six in the evening (although in winter months, the waits, then the morning bell would already have announced the start of the working day). Nor after December 1581 did they run on Sundays when the Tuckers' Guild decreed that no work should be carried out that day and fined members breaching this order.[65] Whatever the reason, this soundmark of early industrial activity may have created a complementary rhythm to the working week from the curfew bells across the city, though perhaps a less reliable one.

There were plenty of activities in open spaces which made just as much contribution to the city soundscape as the busy streets, industrial areas and bells. In two instances, the soundmarks of smaller-scale military preparations provided aural reminders for Exeter's inhabitants of the ever-present need for readiness in defence of the realm. Before the Reformation, the Dominican Blackfriars occupied space to the north of the cathedral. After the dissolution, this became the substantial town house and grounds of the earl of Bedford, depicted as Bedford House on Hooker's plan. Though not strictly public space, it was nevertheless here, in June 1571, that Exeter's elite company of Merchant Adventurers took part in midsummer military musters, providing fully armed members clanking in armour. They were accompanied by 11 men designated as 'Whysselers' to keep them in order.[66] Another area was Friernhay, marked on the plan in the bottom left-hand corner as 'Fryers Hay'. Once a house of the Franciscan Order, after the Reformation the land was acquired by the city and tenter frames for stretching drying cloth after fulling were set up, depicted on the plan.[67] This was also a public space where archery butts could be found, and as inhabitants certainly kept longbows in their homes, even if the practice was dying out towards the end of the sixteenth century, the sound of arrows whistling through the air might have been heard here.[68] Archery butts can also be seen on Hooker's plan on the right-hand side of Bonhaye.

Then there was that contentious area, Cathedral Close, in particular the churchyard area. Nearly all people were buried here, but it was not always a respected Christian dormitory and since medieval times the graveyard had been subject to misuse and abuse. Games were played amongst the graves, it was used by labouring workmen, pigs wandered in, horses grazed the grass and goods were offered for sale. When fights broke out and blood was drawn, the cemetery had to be closed and reconsecrated. Matters did not improve in the sixteenth century. By 1510, trees marking the boundary around the graveyard had become lurking-places of 'evil and

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[64]J. Youings, *Tuckers Hall Exeter* (Exeter, 1968), 4–5.

[65]B.F. Cresswell, *A Short History of The Worshipful Company of Weaver, Fullers and Shearmen of the City and County of Exeter* (Exeter, 1930), 63.

[66]W. Cotton, *An Elizabethan Guild of the City of Exeter* (Exeter, 1873), 118–19.

[67]Orme, *The Churches of Medieval Exeter*, 101–2, 140; T. Gray (ed.), *The Exeter Cloth Dispatch Book 1763–1765* (Woodbridge, 2021), 87.

[68]DHC/ECA/Act Book 3, 214 and 423; J. Crocker, *Elizabethan Inventories and Wills of the Exeter Orphans' Court* (2 vols., Exeter, 2016), vol. I, xxxvi.

naughty persons' who threatened the peace and so were cut down.[69] In 1599, the bishop complained about citizens' use of the churchyard as a communal rubbish dump, casting waste over paths and graves. They were also digging pits (which involved removing human bones) to use as 'houses of office'. When cathedral officers politely admonished the perpetrators, they were repaid with torrents of verbal abuse and threats of violence, at least according to the cathedral.[70]

But perhaps one of the most profound transformations of open space occurred outside the city walls. Southernhay, sometimes referred to as 'the pasture of Southernhay' (and labelled 'Crolditch' on Hooker's plan), was not just open grassland for grazing ruminants. Though largely devoid of permanent material culture itself, it provided a public arena for large-scale activities of high drama and strong emotions. Exeter did not have a central market square (the central space depicted on Hooker's plan is Cathedral Close). It seems there was nowhere in the city for a substantial crowd to cluster together at one time. It may have been that the long, wide High Street could have been used, but that the chamber preferred large, noisy gatherings with potentially disorderly or dangerous activities to take place safely outside the walls, so they gathered instead in Southernhay. Its incidental, yet distinct soundmarks, arising from the importation of a variety of largely temporary material culture, perhaps created a soundscape heard nowhere else. Here was where you would have heard the sounds associated with the annual Lammas or Crolditch Fair.[71] It was also the place where the clanking of armour, this time from hundreds of men from humble archers to musketeers could be heard when they mustered for 'a view of armour'.[72] Southernhay was also the place where the crackling of fire and the gasps of the crowd could be heard when someone was burned at the stake, such as Agnes Jones who in 1571 was so treated for poisoning her husband. Here too was where John Boneface was hanged, drawn and quartered in 1539, convicted of high treason for discussing the king's destruction.[73] Hooker's plan also depicts the pond there where people came to see scolding women punished by a ducking in the cuckingstool having first been carried through the city's streets.[74] Near here was where bear-baiting took place, so the roar of tormented bears could be heard, accompanied on one occasion in 1582, by the cries of injured and dying people when the viewing scaffold collapsed beneath them.[75]

Keynote animals

Finally, returning to keynote, nature-based sounds, animals were everywhere. Outside its city walls, Exeter was surrounded by marshes, pasture, orchards and gardens, all referred to in property and taxation documents.[76] An acoustic ground

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[69]Orme, *Exeter Cathedral*, 22–35.

[70]Curtis, *Some Disputes*, 50.

[71]Kowaleski, *Local Markets*, 62; Stoyle, *Circled with Stone*, 43.

[72]Stoyle, *Circled with Stone*, 43.

[73]T. Gray, *The Chronicle of Exeter 1205–1722* (Exeter, 2005), 85 and 105.

[74]DHC/ECA/Act Book 4, 127, 135–7, 183.

[75]Gray, *Chronicle*, 111. This took place in 'Paris Garden' in the parish of St Sidwell. Modern Paris Street lies to the immediate north of Southernhay, and is depicted on Hooker's map as running along the side of Crolditch.

[76]For example, DHC/ECA, City Receiver's Accounts Rolls E10–F5: 'pasture of Snayle Tower outside the walls' and 'meadows, toft and garden by Holloway'; and DHC/ECA, Ed/M/1247.

of rural sounds seems likely to have bled constantly into the city. Despite Hooker's plan depicting a countryside devoid of farm animals, records of tithe payments in the Easter Books tell a different story. One nearby rural parish's inhabitants (Broadclyst in 1612) were assessed on cows, calves, colts and hogs.[77] There were sheep too of course; a return survives for Devon from 1549 when the abortive national tax on sheep was proposed.[78] Hooker himself affirms that 'the nombre of sheepe in this countrie is as greate or greatr then in any sheere in this Lande'.[79] Although there were stables for horses in the back streets, they were taken to graze on the pasture.[80]

The cries of beasts being butchered must also have resonated from the city slaughterhouse just outside the West Gate, as well as (illegally) inside the city.[81] At the Great Conduit was a pig and poultry market with its squealing and squawking accompanied by the pigs that plenty of people kept in their backyards.[82] Further down the High Street by St John's church was where, by Elizabeth I's reign, the cattle market took place.[83] Hooker's plan may represent the wish to exclude rural life from its official image but despite, as a city, being an exceptional place to live and work with its tall timber-framed houses, its gothic-inspired water fountains and its classical guildhall frontage, the omnipresence of edible animals may have transformed its streets into something of a farmyard that emitted sound (and if the 'Presentments' are accurate, smell) that were inescapable anywhere within the walls, not just without. The other animals absent from the plan's streets were dogs. Dogs were clearly identified as noise nuisances because they barked and fought at night, waking people from their sleep. The 'Presentments' note John Jones and John Parr who kept 'doggs which douthe troble the hole strate bothe daye and night'.[84] In fact, the local laws allowed dogs to be killed if found roaming on the streets, unless they were Spaniels.[85]

Conclusion

Recreating the unique soundscape of a smaller city has its challenges; many urban sounds were common in all cities; Reinhard Strohm mentions church bells, clocks and music, city waits and the human voice in fifteenth-century Bruges and Vienna.[86] Mark M. Smith makes the point that until the twentieth century, urban areas

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[77]T. Gray, *Devon Parish Taxpayers 1500–1650*, vol. II: *Bere Ferrers to Chudleigh* (Exeter, 2016), 214–35.

[78]W. Beresford, 'The poll tax and census of sheep, 1549', *Agricultural History Review*, 2 (1954), 15–29.

[79]W.J. Blake, 'Hooker's synopsis chorographical of Devonshire', *Transactions of the Devonshire Association*, 47 (1915), 347.

[80]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 749, mentions stables found in the back streets of Exeter, for example in St Mary Arches Street. In Crocker, *Elizabethan Inventories*, vol. II, 290, Thomas Greenwood's stable houses a 'gray nagge'. In The National Archives PROB 11/90, Francis Bryna's horse is described as pastured in the countryside in his will of 1597.

[81]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 877; DHC/ECA/Book 100, 208–9.

[82]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 917, 850; DHC/ECA/Act Book 4, 52.

[83]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 916.

[84]DHC/ECA/Book 100, 39, 185 and 289.

[85]Harte, Schopp and Tapley-Soper (eds.), *Description*, 898.

[86]R. Strohm, *Music in Late Medieval Bruges* (Oxford, 1985), 1–9; R. Strohm, 'On the soundscape of fifteenth-century Vienna', in Knighton and Mazuela-Anguita (eds.), *Hearing the City*, 282–94.

untouched by water and therefore by aquatic soundscapes were a rare thing.[87] Beating the basin before sexual offenders was a widespread practice.[88] Moreover, whilst it may be possible to detect distinct auditory zones within larger cities, within smaller urban centres, like Exeter, such zones may have been less obvious and none of this is helped by the sparsity of direct references to sound. There is much more listening to be done, if the sources will allow, not least to do with frequency and reality over intention – in the winter months, were inhabitants really awakened both by waits at 3am and bells at 5am?

Nevertheless, it is possible to detect that sixteenth-century Exeter's soundscape, arising partly from the deliberate use made of the material culture of public spaces as well as in them, and partly from a combination of incidental soundmarks and keynote rural sounds, helps us tune into aspects of civic identity beyond the visual representation of street plans. In Exeter, for example, added significance is given to particular church towers in the battle to appropriate the ring of the curfew bells, the timings for permitted operation of the thumping tucking mills reveals an industrial rhythm to the day, an outside area becomes an arena of high drama and emotion and the underlying rural squawking farmyard ambience belies Hooker's quiet, elegant, utopian identity. Most of all, the arm-wrestling between the chamber and the cathedral is given an aural dimension that must have been overheard by all its inhabitants.

It seems right to end with one truly unique soundmark for Exeter, however, one last instance of noise pollution. It was the weathercock on the church steeple of St Mary Major. Stormy weather resulted in it keeping Katharine of Aragon awake in the nearby dean's house, *en route* to marry Prince Arthur ('it did so whistle') and was swiftly taken down at the time. It was resurrected and remained in place for a further 60 years until 1580, but whether it had been oiled to silence it is not known.[89]

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[87]M.M. Smith, 'Why historians of auditory urban past might consider getting their ears wet', in K. Bijsterveld (ed.), *Soundscapes of the Urban Past: Staged Sound as Mediated Cultural Heritage* (Bielefeld, 2013), 67–76.

[88]C. Brooks and M. Lobban (eds.), *Communities and Courts in Britain 1150–1900* (London, 1997), 70.

[89]Gray, *Chronicle*, 67.

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