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# MATTHEW NOSWORTHY: A BUILDER IN GEORGIAN EXETER

ROSEMARY YALLOP

*This article looks at the work of Devon builder Matthew Nosworthy (1750–1831), who was responsible as architect and builder-speculator for a number of town-house schemes in Exeter in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Some of his buildings were lost in the 1942 Blitz, when air-raids destroyed much of the centre of Exeter, but enough of his work remains to evidence the skill of this relatively obscure figure in creating urban set-pieces of sophistication and refinement.*

Visiting in 1698, Celia Fiennes recorded that ‘Exeter is a town very well built’. She described its ‘well-pitched, spacious noble streets’, and compared it to London in its profusion of markets, exchanges and shops. She remarked on the importance of woollen cloth to the economy of the city and its hinterland: ‘the whole town and Country is employed for at least 20 miles round in spinning, weaving, dressing and scouring, fulling and drying of the serges. It turns the most money in a week of anything in England.’<sup>1</sup> Daniel Defoe described the city in 1724 as ‘large, rich, beautiful, populous’; ‘a city famous for two things which we seldom find unite in the same town, that ’tis full of gentry and good company, and yet full of trade and manufactures also.’<sup>2</sup> Later visitors, such as Robert Southey in the opening years of the nineteenth century, were unimpressed: ‘Exeter is an ancient city, and has been so slow in adopting modern improvements ...

The inhabitants in general are behindhand with their countrymen in information and in refinement.’<sup>3</sup>

Southey may have been unduly harsh, but it is certainly the case that Exeter at the end of the eighteenth century was facing an uncertain future. Its pre-eminence as a centre for the wool and cloth trade was already in decline in the mid 1750s, occasioning the bankruptcy of many involved in various aspects of the trade, including that of George Coade, father of Eleanor, the artificial stone manufacturer, in 1759.<sup>4</sup> The French Wars from 1793 closed Exeter’s overseas markets, and by the late 1790s the cloth industry was ‘moribund beyond hope of recovery’,<sup>5</sup> although as a port the city still maintained a status of sorts as a trading centre, which in turn encouraged the growth of banking and ancillary enterprises. By contrast, its role as county town and regional capital, together with the attraction of ‘gentry and good company’ identified by Defoe, fostered the city’s expansion from the last decade of the eighteenth century and on into the next. ‘In 1803’, as the great local historian W.G. Hoskins remarked:

‘we have a picture of a city in transition from a commercial centre of one-time national importance to the quiet Victorian city of a residential character. Fortunately the climate of the region and the beauty of the countryside, not to mention that it was a cultivated city, attracted – particularly after the Napoleonic Wars were over – a large class of retired people of more or less cultivated means, with all the attendant services and labour they required. Thus Exeter did not sink

into the sort of stagnation that other towns have suffered when their fortunes have changed. By 1837 ... that transition had virtually been completed.<sup>6</sup>

The period between the 1790s and the accession of King William IV saw the construction of some sophisticated set-pieces of urban planning offering well-appointed town houses for the incoming mercantile and professional élite, a cadre of 'rich men graduating into gentility ... or those conceived to be gentlemen by reason of function'.<sup>7</sup> A number of these schemes were the work of the Exeter builder-architect Matthew Nosworthy.

#### MATTHEW NOSWORTHY

Matthew Nosworthy was born in Widecombe-in-the-Moor, a Dartmoor village, in June 1750 to Ambrose and Mary (née Mortimore), the eldest of five children.<sup>8</sup> The Nosworthy name was common throughout Dartmoor, and occupations included woolcombers and yeoman farmers; Ambrose's occupation has not been traced. At some point Matthew moved to Exeter, marrying Martha Skinner in the parish of St George in 1776, and producing eight children. No record can be found of an apprenticeship served by Matthew, either on the Moor or in Exeter. The earliest record of his trade so far located is in 1783, when he took on John Sweet as apprentice joiner in Exeter.<sup>9</sup> Matthew no doubt started out as a journeyman joiner, but he clearly became a builder-speculator: by 1788, for example, he had built houses for sale in the city parish of St Sidwell,<sup>10</sup> where he spent most of his working life. He must have prospered, advertising in 1790 for 'Three or four journeymen joiners, good workers, who will meet with good encouragement';<sup>11</sup> in the same year his name appears, described as 'Joiner', as a freeholder voting in the Exeter parliamentary election. He appears in the *Exeter Militia List* of 1803, described as a builder; three of

his five sons also appear there, including his eldest child, Thomas, born in 1777, who was described as 'builder'. Thomas became his father's formal partner; an indenture of 1799, when he would have been 22, records the apprenticeship of Thomas Courtis Lloyd to joint masters Matthew and Thomas Nosworthy, joiners of Exeter.<sup>12</sup> No apprenticeship records have been traced for Thomas, who was presumably trained by his father. Another son, Matthew junior, born in 1791, is later listed in Exeter directories as both 'gent.', and 'lodging-house keeper', the latter referring to his role in managing the Nosworthy property interests in the city.<sup>13</sup> In 1810 Matthew Nosworthy senior was appointed one of three paving and lighting commissioners for St Sidwell's parish, in which capacity he served until his resignation in 1830.<sup>14</sup>

By 1827, aged in his late seventies, Matthew Nosworthy's health was failing and Thomas was supervising work on at least one site.<sup>15</sup> Matthew died at his home in Dix's Field, Exeter, on 22 March 1831. An obituary noted only that he had 'carried on extensive business in the city as a builder'.<sup>16</sup> His will ran to eighteen pages, its complexity explained by the inclusion of directions regarding his property holdings in St Sidwell's.<sup>17</sup> He was able to leave generous annuities to his wife and children funded from rental and dividend income; his widow survived him by six months. A valuation of every property in the city undertaken for the Exeter Poor Law Commissioners in the 1830s reveals the extent of the property interests built up by Matthew and inherited by his family; in St Sidwell's, Matthew junior and Thomas between them owned twelve houses and seven mews buildings in Dix's Field, as well as another eight houses elsewhere in the city.<sup>18</sup>

Matthew, while described in his own will as 'gentleman', does not seem to have ascended socially to the extent which can be observed in the careers of other Exeter architects of the period: Philip Stowey, for example, to whom further reference will be made below, who prospered as Architect to the East

India Company in Madras and returned to Devon transformed into a landed proprietor meriting the suffix Esquire,<sup>19</sup> or Nosworthy's contemporary and rival William Hooper, who produced two succeeding generations of Mayors of the city. Nosworthy's civic recognition was limited to the status of Improvement Commissioner. Little has been found about Thomas's career after his father's death in 1831; he died in 1850, and his will does not suggest that the profession of builder was carried on by a third generation.<sup>20</sup>

A complete list of Nosworthy's work, both within the city and possibly elsewhere in the county, has never been compiled.<sup>21</sup> This article considers in chronological order four town-house schemes with which he was involved in Exeter: Southernhay, where he was first consulted in 1791, but where building,

by him and others, progressed over two decades; Barnfield Crescent, from 1792; Colleton Crescent, from 1802; and Dix's Field, from around 1815, where Nosworthy was to make his own home. (Fig. 1)

### SOUTHERNHAY

The affairs of the city of Exeter were directed by the Chamber, otherwise known as 'The Council of Twenty-Four', a body which continued unchanged until the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. According to Exeter's first historian: 'The Common Council of the XXIII is a Company selected and Chosen of the most wyse and grave and Discreete Citesens and which are of good expyement in government of the Common welthe.'<sup>22</sup> It derived

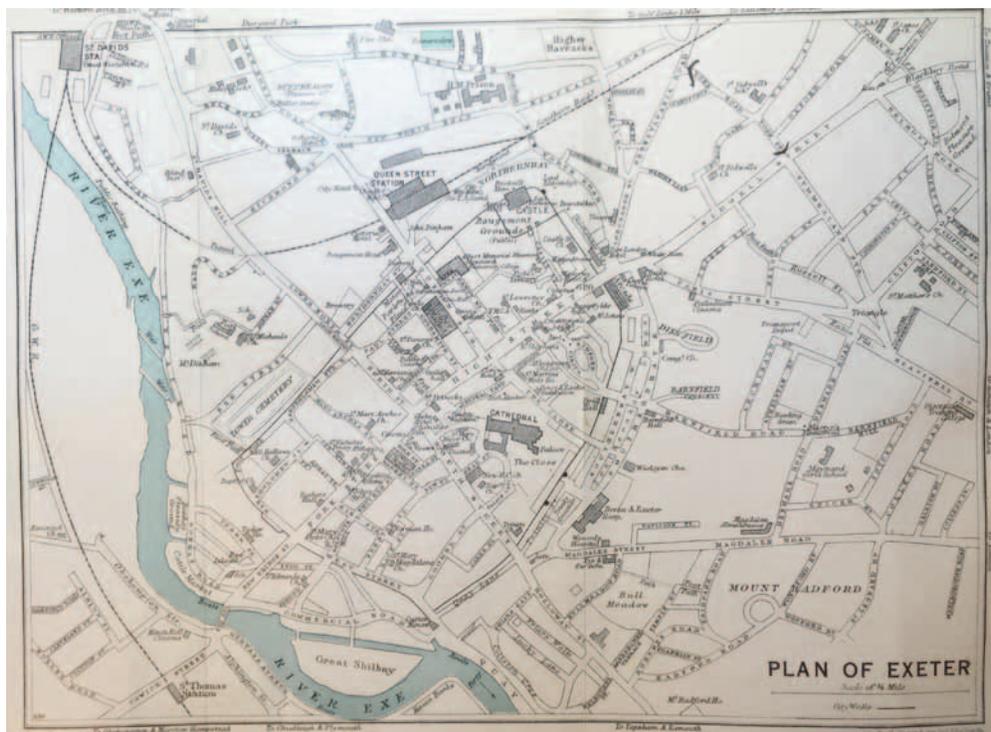
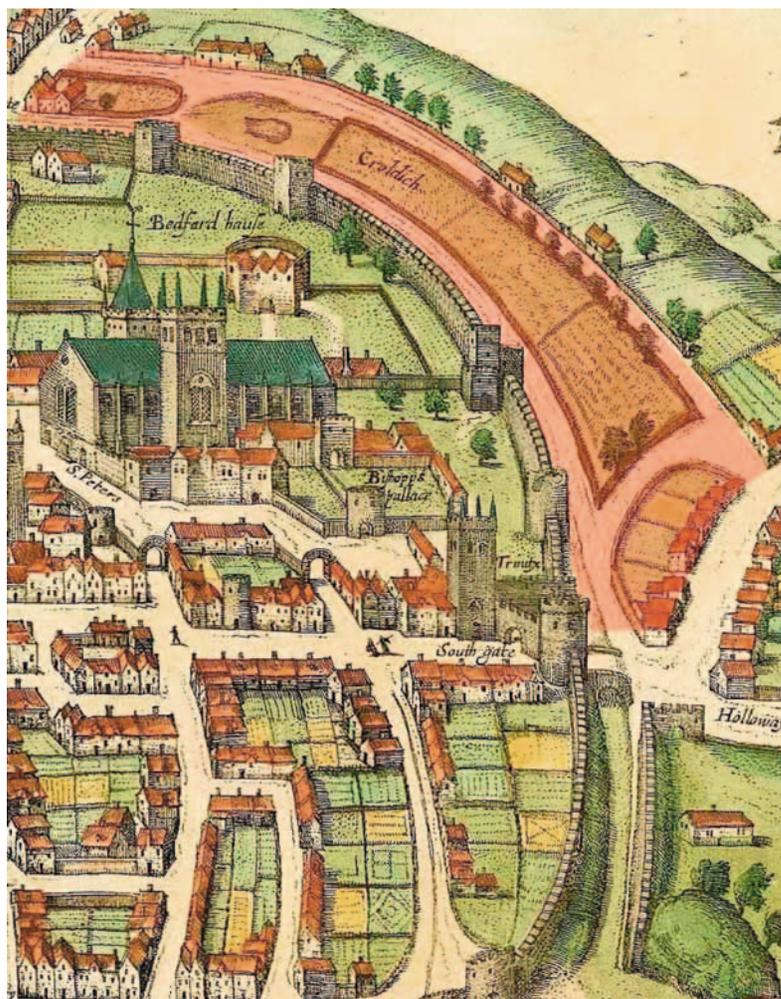


Fig. 1. Exeter in 1934 showing all four of Nosworthy's schemes. (*Ward Lock's Guide to Exeter and the South-west*, London, 1934)

Fig. 2. The 'Crudditch' – the site of Southernhay, outside the city walls, detail from Braun and Hogenburg's map of 1587'. (Facsimile in author's collection)



its income from holdings of property and land in and around the city, and was responsible for Exeter's civic infrastructure: its quay, canal and river, roads and bridges. Its role in the city's 'Improvement' gathered impetus in the last decades of the eighteenth century,<sup>23</sup> as it initiated schemes to improve the flow of commercial traffic into the city, removing the old city gates, widening roads and replacing the mediaeval bridge over the Exe. The Chamber also turned its attention to the need to accommodate increasing numbers of professional men and their families who wished to live in the

city. The first example of planned, new residential building in Exeter was not, however, instigated by the Chamber but by a private landowner. The Russell family, later the Dukes of Bedford, had at the time of the Dissolution obtained the Benedictine priory which lay within the city walls to the north of the Cathedral and had built a substantial town house, Bedford House, on the site. On a visit to Exeter as Lord Lieutenant in 1769, the fourth Duke of Bedford was attacked by mobs objecting to his support of French silk imports, to the detriment of local trade, and as a result he resolved to sell the

house and site.<sup>24</sup> He died in 1771, and in 1773 the Dowager Duchess of Bedford and her co-trustees<sup>25</sup> entered into a building agreement with Exeter builders Robert Stribling and Giles Painter for the construction of a new circus to be named Bedford Circus, their obligations to include the demolition of the old house and the re-use of its materials.<sup>26</sup> The first tranche of fourteen houses was completed by 1776;<sup>27</sup> the other half of the circus was executed by another Exeter builder, Thomas Wills Horrell, in the 1820s.<sup>28</sup>

The history of the building of Bedford Circus merits a separate article in itself, but its significance here lies in the implication that it may have been instrumental in persuading the Chamber to initiate its own residential development scheme. The Bedford site represented in the 1770s the only parcel of building land within the city walls, and even then was available only through the demolition of existing buildings; Southernhay was the first example of planned development taking place beyond the ancient boundaries, and on a new site, where the Chamber was the predominant landowner. It lay to the east of the Cathedral outside the line of the city walls, between the old South and East Gates. Its name means southern field, or southern enclosure, and its long, narrow shape was dictated by the town ditch, or Crulditch, which followed the external line of the walls, and was a prominent feature of the late sixteenth-century map of the city by Braun and Hogenburg.<sup>29</sup> (Fig. 2) In the mediaeval and later period this piece of land had a variety of semi-official and public uses: for the execution of criminals, and the annual Lammas Fair. The Civil War saw it ploughed and re-laid to form defensive structures, but in the Restoration period most of it was laid out as a pleasure garden,<sup>30</sup> and although many buildings had been destroyed during the Civil War, scattered houses remained along its perimeter.<sup>31</sup> Donn's map of 1765 shows a Bowling Green and Tozer's map of 1793 a Racket Court, both on the eastern side of the green.<sup>32</sup> Not all of the land at Southernhay was

owned by the Chamber,<sup>33</sup> and there was some new, piecemeal development. In 1664 a new walled burial ground was consecrated on the western side at its southern end, known as Trinity Churchyard, and on a site opposite to it, formerly used as a tiltyard and horse fair, the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital opened in 1742.<sup>34</sup>

In October 1774, less than eighteen months after ground was broken at Bedford Circus, the Chamber made a significant decision when it 'ordered that Mr. Receiver do employ Mr. Stowey and Mr. Jones of this city, Builders, to draw up a proper plan for building on Southernhay as soon as possible and to lay the same before this body.'<sup>35</sup> Thomas Jones was an Exeter builder listed in 1778 as 'Surveyor of the Common Sewer';<sup>36</sup> Philip Stowey was a builder from Exminster, then in partnership with Jones, his brother-in-law.<sup>37</sup> It is not clear that Messrs. Jones and Stowey ever produced any detailed plans and elevations for Southernhay, but they were active during this period on other Chamber projects such as the Neo-classical Sessions House in the Castle (1773–5), a design reviewed and altered by James Wyatt.<sup>38</sup>

It turned out to be a protracted process. In November 1775 the Chamber recorded its opinion that 'Buildings upon Southernhay will be beneficial to the Publick', appointing a committee of eight members to 'consider Mr Stowey's plan for the purpose.'<sup>39</sup> In November 1776, anticipating the creation of this new residential enclave, the Chamber appointed a committee to supervise a new thoroughfare to connect Bedford Circus to Southernhay, 'through the Town Wall'.<sup>40</sup> Stowey, however, left for Madras in 1777 on his appointment as Civil Architect, Surveyor and Master Bricklayer to the East India Company.<sup>41</sup> In June 1778 a successor Chamber committee was appointed 'to settle and carry into execution the plan for building on Southernhay',<sup>42</sup> but the minutes suggest that Jones was dilatory, to say the least. In August 1782 the Southernhay Committee was asked to 'take the



Fig. 3. Southernhay West, looking towards the Cathedral (tower just visible) and the bridge across the city wall. (*Rosemary Yallop*)

Business into their consideration without any further delay,<sup>43</sup> and requests to Jones to produce plans were minuted in 1783, 1784, and 1787.<sup>44</sup>

Probably having lost patience, in February 1792 the Chamber paid eight guineas to Matthew Nosworthy for ‘drawing plans of the buildings on Southernhay’, which seem to have been commissioned in 1791.<sup>45</sup> In December 1792 the Chamber’s Southernhay Committee recorded that ‘several builders had made proposals for buildings and houses on Southernhay *according to the plan and elevation produced*’ [author’s italics].<sup>46</sup> The Chamber therefore seems to have adopted Nosworthy’s 1792 designs as the master-plan for the initial tranche of building on Southernhay,<sup>47</sup> although he did not contract to build it as a whole. A number of Exeter builders and architects are also named in the Chamber records as having taken single or groups of plots, including William Hicks and Joseph Rowe,<sup>48</sup> who were to go on to build groups of villas in

Exeter’s expanding suburbs in the 1820s and 1830s, and James Chapple, who had been apprenticed to Thomas Jones.<sup>49</sup> The Chamber maintained tight overall control of plans, dimensions and materials, reprimanding or fining builders who deviated from the agreed terms.<sup>50</sup> The first completed houses seem to date from around 1796, when the Chamber asked the Town Clerk to draw up leases.<sup>51</sup>

The western side of Southernhay was laid out as four uniform terraces, each of ten houses, separated by lanes leading to the Cathedral Close. (Fig. 3) Built of red brick, made in the city from local red clay of which there was a deep band on Polsloe ridge to the east of the city centre, the houses followed the generic Georgian town house model of three bays and three storeys over a basement, and an attic storey containing cockloft windows, partly concealed from the street behind a parapet. Area railings to the front were finished with flame finials. But their otherwise austere elevations were enlivened



Fig. 4. Doorway at No. 2 Southernhay West. (Rosemary Yallop)



Above right: Fig. 5. Balconettes at No. 8 Southernhay West. (Rosemary Yallop)



Right: Fig. 6. City wall in gardens behind Nos. 1-10 Southernhay West. (Rosemary Yallop)

by two elements: first, the graceful arcading of the round-headed ground floor windows which are set into arched recesses, and the application of patent stone, assumed to be Coade stone, both in the form of unifying plat-bands running the length of the terrace at first floor level and as parapets, and as richly-decorated door surrounds. These are formed of patent stone arched architraves on which are mounted vermiculated stone blocks and voussoirs, with mask keystones; it is in striking contrast to the brick façade. In combination, these two elements of detailing lend a degree of sophistication to an otherwise standard provincial template: they were to become characteristic of Nosworthy's work in the city. (Figs. 4, 5) The end houses are set slightly forward and their entrances are on the side returns, giving onto the paths to the Close. The gardens behind the houses, bounded by the city wall,<sup>52</sup> were large enough to accommodate 'choice fruit trees, green-house and hot-house'.<sup>53</sup> (Fig. 6) The pleasure

gardens in the centre were laid out with gravelled paths and enclosed by railings ('palisadoes'), which, in combination with the visible remains of the city walls, created a Picturesque setting. The gardens did, however, remain a space with a semi-official function, being frequently used for ceremonial assemblies such as the celebration of peace with France and the King's birthday, which occasioned military parades and fireworks.<sup>54</sup> Only the western side took the form of uniform terraces; the eastern side took more varied forms including detached houses, and was largely undertaken later and by other hands.<sup>55</sup> The group at Nos. 30-35 Southernhay East, however, closely resembles those over on the west side, and, while there is no firm evidence of Nosworthy's authorship here, he contracted for houses on the east side, adjoining Barnfield Crescent, which were under construction by 1795.<sup>56</sup>

It seems that the newly-developed Southernhay was never intended to be wholly residential: while

the Lammas Fair was moved in 1793 because of the building works,<sup>57</sup> the Chamber permitted Mr. Webb's horse sales to operate from his Repository in Upper Southernhay until 1817. From an early stage, physicians, dentists and music teachers were allowed to practise from their houses there, and the Bank of England opened its Exeter branch at No. 18 Southernhay West in 1827. Those taking up residence included local gentry, surgeons, the Cathedral organist and senior clergy, and the proprietors of both the *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* and the *Exeter Flying Post*.

**BARNFIELD CRESCENT:  
'A STately PILE OF BUILDINGS'**

The *Exeter Flying Post* reported in May 1792 that:

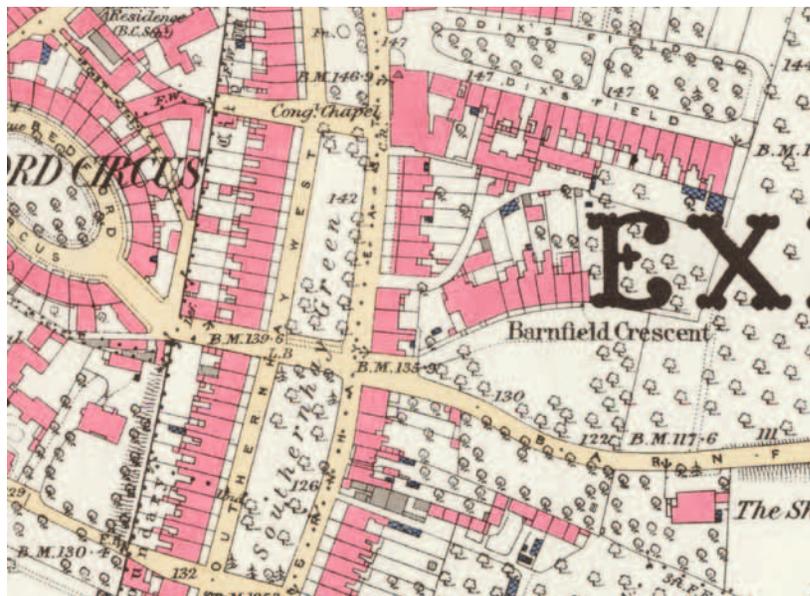
'The ground called the Barnfield adjoining Southernhay is contracted for by Mr. Matthew Nosworthy, architect, for building a new Crescent consisting of at least 27 houses, which are to have a south-eastern aspect, and an extensive view of the

country round. This information must afford great pleasure to the gentry who frequent this city as they will no longer be deprived of an accommodation the want of which has so often occasioned complaint.'<sup>58</sup>

This was to become Barnfield Crescent, where Nosworthy seems to have acquired the freehold or a long head lease. The first stage of building began on 13 September 1792,<sup>59</sup> but progress thereafter was gradual. The earliest lease of a completed house seems to have run from December 1797,<sup>60</sup> another from 1801.<sup>61</sup> By 1805 only five houses had been built. Yet contemporary reports suggest that the expectation remained that the original scheme would be completed; Jenkins in his 1806 guide describes 'a stately pile of buildings in this present time erecting, in the form of a crescent ... five houses are already constructed and inhabited and the whole, when finished, will scarcely be excelled by any pile of brick buildings in the kingdom, even in the capital itself'.<sup>62</sup>

The crescent, leading off the eastern side of upper Southernhay (Fig. 7), was laid out in a gentle curve, with a carriage road and private garden to the front; a walk of less than ten minutes would

Fig. 7. Barnfield Crescent, leading off Southernhay West in 1890, from Ordnance Survey 25-inch series, Devonshire, Sheet LXXX.6. (Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland)



have taken residents to the Cathedral Close. As at Southernhay, the houses are of red brick, of three storeys and attic over a basement and three bays in width, following the same pattern of arcaded ground-floor windows and patent stone bands and parapet (Fig. 8). The treatment of the doorways is, however, simpler, shorn of patent stone blocks and masks, and relying only on fanlight tracery for effect; there are iron balconettes of intricate design to the first floor windows and decorative iron lamp holders on the footpath (Figs. 9a, b). Substantial gardens lay to the rear of the houses, where the elevations included Diocletian windows. They seem to have met market demand, as the *Flying Post* had predicted, for they were occupied immediately by the city's élite: minor aristocracy, local luminaries, naval officers and professional men.<sup>63</sup> During its construction a large spring-fed bath of fired brick was discovered on the site. Nosworthy decided to exploit this to build a public bath-house, fitted out for the genteel use of residents and open by 1804,<sup>64</sup> although it seems to have foundered as an enterprise within a few years. A later addition to the left-hand end of

the terrace was made c.1840, echoing Nosworthy's range but on a lower and wider scale.<sup>65</sup> Today a large detached Edwardian house finishes the line of the crescent's eastern side. Looking at the site it is hard to imagine how 27 houses could possibly have been accommodated, unless it was to be in the form of a circus, although from the earliest date it is consistently referred to as a crescent.

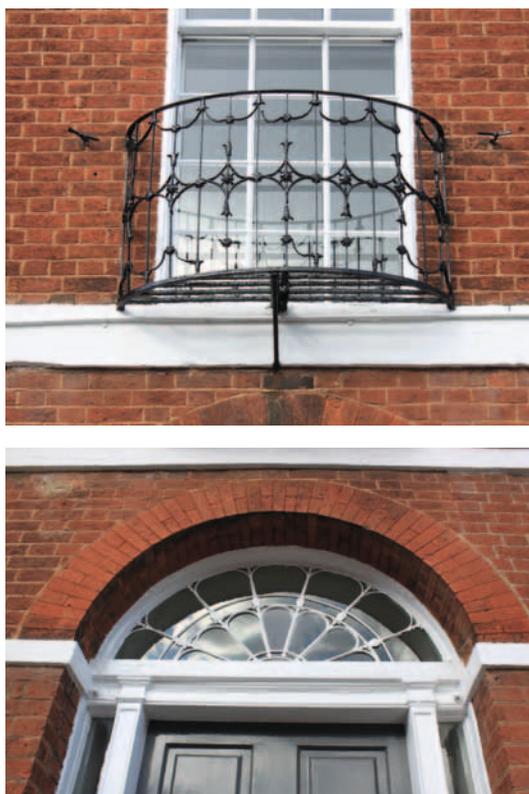
#### COLLETON CRESCENT:

##### 'FINE PROSPECT AND DELIGHTFUL SITUATION'

Nosworthy's authorship of Colleton Crescent, a terrace of houses south of the Cathedral and on a bluff overlooking the River Exe and Exeter Quay, cannot be firmly established. Yet it is almost universally attributed to him,<sup>66</sup> on the grounds of both the similarity of its design to those of the other schemes which he was known to be involved; even if by other hands, his elevations and detailing at Southernhay and Barnfield are likely to have been the model. A description in 1806, while the crescent



Fig. 8. Barnfield Crescent. The lower house to the left was added c.1840. (Rosemary Yallop)



Figs. 9a and b. Barnfield Crescent: details.  
(*Rosemary Yallop*)

was under construction, exclaimed: ‘For salubrity of air, fine prospect, and delightful situation, it cannot be exceeded, if equalled, in any city or town in the kingdom.’<sup>67</sup> The author praised the ‘beautiful pile of buildings, which is to consist of 29 houses comprising a small segment of a circle; behind the gardens of these houses is intended to be erected convenient mews and coach-houses, and another street ... When the whole is finished it will be an ornament to this City.’ Just as at Barnfield Crescent, it is not clear how the site could ever have accommodated 29 houses, and, given the topography, a circus would not have been a viable proposition. It is the most dramatic of his sites, enjoying far-reaching views over the river to the

landed estates lying to the south-west of the city. The land lay outside the city walls, high up above the River Exe and its Quay, on an estate owned by the Colleton family on the site of a former Franciscan monastic house. The site had largely been taken up by rackfields – fields for the open-air drying of woollen serge cloth – the racks visible on Donn’s map of 1765. (Fig. 10)

Louisa Graves, née Colleton, heiress and sole owner of the estate, described the inception of the Crescent:

‘It was also during my residence in Exeter that I commenced the improvements I had planned on my estate called the Friars. I laid the foundation stone of the centre house of Colleton Crescent on the 3<sup>rd</sup> September 1802 amidst a numerous concourse of spectators: General Simcoe, who was then the General of the Western Division, handed me down the platform, where the architect with the plan, and the master mason with his attendants and implements for building, awaited me. The band of the Inniskillin Regiment of Horse attended on the occasion, ready to strike up ‘God Save the King’ the moment I appeared, which they continued playing till I drew off my glove and laid my hand on the stone, the signal for the music to cease. While I addressed the architect, after having laid the foundation stone, under which was deposited a box, containing coins of gold, silver and copper, I presented a purse of gold to be distributed amongst the workmen on this occasion; the purse was emblematical.’<sup>68</sup>

The crescent (Fig. 11) follows Nosworthy’s characteristic pattern: of brick, with bands and parapet of patent stone, most of the houses being of three bays, and of four storeys over a basement, with front area railings and arcaded windows. But it is not wholly uniform: its present-day appearance of nine houses contains a central range of five houses (modern-day Nos. 3–7), flanked on each side by one house of almost identical elevation, but each storey slightly lower, disrupting the otherwise continuous cornices and plat-bands. Flanking each of these is an even lower house of two bays with single-storey side entrances, and giant Neo-classical pilasters which





Figs. 12a and b. Colleton Crescent: details.  
(*Rosemary Yallop*)

interiors are much altered as most of the houses are now in multiple, commercial use, but at least one retains its cantilevered spiral stone staircase which rises through four floors under an oval glazed lantern (Fig. 13).<sup>72</sup>

The railed garden to the front was private but, like Southernhay, was used for ceremonial occasions: for the birthday celebrations of King George III in June 1804 a corps of the Royal Artillery was drawn up on the grass, facing other regiments ranged on the other side of the Exe, to exchange ceremonial

volleys across the river. The ‘fine terrace walk near 100 feet above the bed of the river’ had ‘one of the most charming prospects imaginable’.<sup>73</sup> The crescent attracted the city’s elite: attorneys, bankers, naval officers, nabobs and Chamber members. It is prominent on the Exeter skyline as seen from the south-west, as part of a picturesque view which encompasses the river and quay below and the cathedral towers beyond, and the crescent was frequently depicted by artists: the best known image is J.M.W. Turner’s watercolour of 1827 (Fig. 14).



Fig. 14. Colleton Crescent as depicted by J.M.W. Turner (*Exeter*, watercolour, c.1827). (Manchester Art Gallery, Acc. 1917.107; Manchester Art Gallery/Bridgeman Images)



Fig. 13. Staircase at No. 5 Colleton Crescent. (Reproduced by permission of Messrs. Savills, Exeter)



Fig. 15. Nos. 1 and 2 Dix's Field, 1942.  
(Crown Copyright, *Historic England*: image BB42/00611)

#### DIX'S FIELD: 'HIGH, DRY AND HEALTHY'

William Spicer Dix was an Exeter brewer who in the 1770s acquired parcels of land adjacent to the upper eastern end of Southernhay,<sup>74</sup> consolidating them into one site which became known as Dix's Field. Having in 1796 offered building leases, with plans and elevations, on this 'high, dry and healthy' site,<sup>75</sup> he over-reached himself commercially before any development took place, and was advertised as bankrupt in April 1798.<sup>76</sup> At some point Matthew Nosworthy acquired the land in its entirety: he may have been the author of the plans for William Dix.

A double house at the north-western corner was already in existence when Nosworthy purchased the site (Fig. 15). A stuccoed villa with decorative metalwork and balcony, attached to a lower range,

it was in a different style from those which were later built, and was not originally intended to be a permanent element of the scheme, although it was not in the end demolished. Later to be known as No. 1 Dix's Field, but also described by Nosworthy in his will as 'the Bow-Window House', it remained in family ownership, although tenanted; he lived in No. 2, the two-storey house to the right, until the end of his life.

The development of Dix's Field stretched over two decades or more. The Devon antiquary Robert Dymond suggested in 1888 that the development of Dix's Field was delayed by depressed markets caused by the Napoleonic Wars.<sup>77</sup> It is clear that work had not begun by January 1815:



Fig. 16. Nos. 11–15 Dix’s Field.  
(Rosemary Yallop)

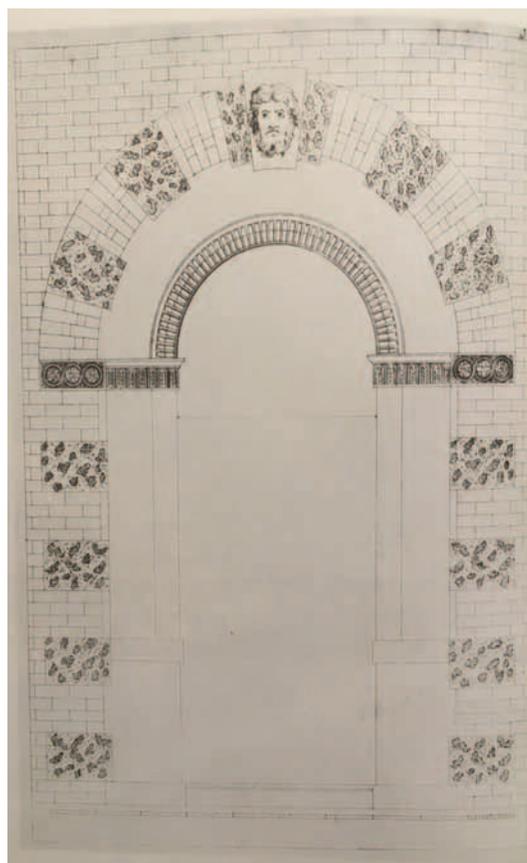
‘[It is] emphatically a place which promises to unite more desirable points and real advantages than any collection of genteel residences yet built in Exeter, and it is intended that this beautiful new feature of our ancient city shall be set about immediately. The houses are designed to be built pretty much of the size and plan of those of Southernhay-place; uniform without, but varying in size within if desired by the purchasers ... with all that is elegant, uniform, and in perfect good taste.’

It was originally to be called Nosworthy Place.<sup>78</sup> Building finally got under way, and in August 1818 ‘The Southernhay Private Seminary, on the Eton Plan’, was to open there.<sup>79</sup> In June 1824, of the proposed total of forty houses, ‘twenty had been built and only seven sold’.<sup>80</sup> Work was still in progress as late as 1827, but under Thomas’s

supervision, ‘Mr. Nosworthy from infirmity not having been able to attend to the work-people’.<sup>81</sup> In the end only 24 of the 40 new houses were completed, seven in the north terrace and seventeen in the south, but the northern range was incomplete and nothing was built at the eastern end. The pleasure gardens in the centre were laid out and enclosed within railings, and the entrance from Upper Southernhay was marked by a decorative iron gateway with lamp-posts. As the *Western Luminary* pointed out, the houses resembled those of Southernhay in size, three bays wide and three storeys high, with basement and attic, with the recessed round-headed ground floor windows, but the treatment of the elevations was different. Finished in the same red brick, there are balconies across the whole house width at first-floor level, and the continuous plat-band has correspondingly been raised by one storey; the most striking difference is the simplification of the doorways, shorn of Coade stone ornamentation. (Fig. 16) No. 9, in the north range, had a tented balcony.<sup>82</sup>

#### NOSWORTHY’S SOURCES AND USE OF COADE STONE

Without knowledge of Nosworthy’s training, identifying models which informed his urban templates can only be speculative. There are no obvious precedents within the city for Nosworthy’s terraces. The striking resemblance between the houses of Southernhay West and those of Bedford Square in London might suggest a connection between Nosworthy and the Bedford estates, yet there is no evidence of his having been involved in the Bedford Circus scheme in Exeter and no reason to suppose that he might have seen plans for Bedford Square. The circus layout on the Bedford site in Exeter was chosen, it is believed, by the fourth Duke’s widow and trustees because he had wanted to replicate the Circus at Bath.<sup>83</sup>



Figs. 17 a, b and c: a: No. 22 Bedford Square, London. (*Rosemary Yallop*)  
 b: Doorway pattern from 1784 Coad catalogue. (© *British Library Board, shelfmark 11802.b.24, plate 32*)

Whether Nosworthy was specifically influenced in his use of the crescent form by Bedford Circus remains an open question. The houses built there were not models for Nosworthy's work, eschewing round-headed windows and Coad stone doorways in favour of pilastered entrance porticoes:<sup>84</sup> the detailing of his elevations and use of Coad stone were ideas which had clearly come from elsewhere.

A simple answer might be that Nosworthy, in common with other provincial builders of the time, made use of pattern books. The Bedford Square doorways closely resemble a design for a Coad

doorway in a collection of engravings published in 1784 where the quoins and voussoirs are partly recessed into the brickwork;<sup>85</sup> Nosworthy's simpler and more economical, but less refined, version at Southernhay and Colleton Crescent deployed a complete stone door surround on which the decorative pieces were mounted to give the appearance of blocks and voussoirs as structural elements. (Figs. 17a, b and c) In the same way, the recessed and arcaded ground floor windows, while distinctive and at the time novel in Exeter, are of a pattern which can be found throughout London in



c: No. 34 Southernhay East, Exeter.  
(Rosemary Yallop)

brick houses of both modest and more ambitious status of the 1790s; indeed its use continued in the capital for at least two more decades.<sup>86</sup> Plate 20 in the anonymously edited *The Builder's Magazine* (London, 1774) shows a design by John Carter for a three-bay town house of three storeys over a basement, with plat-bands, balconettes to the first floor windows and relieving arches to the round-headed ground floor windows.<sup>87</sup>

The exuberant use of Coad stone in the city is not directly connected with the Coad family's origins in Exeter, for the bankruptcy of

Eleanor's father occasioned the family's removal to London in the early 1760s.<sup>88</sup> Its application in counterpointing otherwise plain brick façades would have held great appeal, and its appearance in Exeter is unsurprising.<sup>89</sup> Despite the many examples of it in the city,<sup>90</sup> however, the surviving Coad accounts record only a small number of orders from Exeter builders, including the purchase of 'Three keystones, comic heads' at a guinea each by Thomas Horrell and one by Robert Cornish, all in 1815.<sup>91</sup> Given that surviving papers date only from 1813,<sup>92</sup> they contain no record of the substantial orders which must have been placed for the construction of both Southernhay and Colleton Crescent, and Nosworthy's name does not appear.<sup>93</sup> It has not been possible to identify the Exeter keystone masks from the catalogues, but they are either rustic, bearded men, some with caps,<sup>94</sup> or grotesques,<sup>95</sup> with some female heads.<sup>96</sup>

#### THE IMPACT OF THE BLITZ: 'RUIN BUT NOT ANNIHILATION'

The centre of Exeter was devastated by bombing raids during the Second World War. The attack on the mediaeval German city of Lübeck by the RAF in March 1942 is believed to have inspired a new Luftwaffe strategy of targeting cities of historical and architectural significance to strike at civilian morale, and Exeter was to be the first victim of these so-called 'Baedeker raids'. In a massive onslaught in the early hours of 4 May 1942 incendiary bombs injured hundreds of people and killed 161; one fifth of the city's housing stock was destroyed or badly damaged, by direct impact and subsequent fires. The Cathedral was hit, although damage was contained, but areas surrounding the Close suffered most, Bedford Circus being badly damaged<sup>97</sup> and the upper part of Southernhay West destroyed (Fig. 18). Of the twenty-four houses in Dix's Field, only three in the southern range and three to the north survived

Fig. 18. 25-36  
Southernhay West,  
May 1942. (*Crown  
Copyright, Historic  
England: image  
BB42/00714*)



Fig. 19. Nos. 1  
and 2 Dix's Field  
(Nosworthy's own  
home), May 1942.  
(*Crown Copyright,  
Historic England:  
image BB42/00718*)





Fig. 20. Dix's Field, c.1840 drawing by Emmanuel Jeffrey. Devon Heritage Services, Thomas Shapter Collection. (Reproduced by permission of Devon Heritage Services)

reasonably intact; in the northern range, four were gutted but retained their façades, and Nosworthy's own former home and the 'Bow-fronted House' were reduced to rubble (Fig. 19).<sup>98</sup> Barnfield Crescent and Colleton Crescent were largely unscathed.<sup>99</sup> 'Exeter was a Jewel. We have destroyed it', claimed German radio later that day.<sup>100</sup>

The post-war climate was not favourable to its restoration: while some of the Southernhay houses were rebuilt behind their façades, the northernmost block of Southernhay West was lost. One house in Dix's Field was rebuilt using salvaged materials, leaving a terrace of four contiguous houses to the south-east, but the decision was made not to salvage

the rest, despite the impassioned arguments of town planner Thomas Sharp, commissioned by the City Council to plan the city's post-war rebuilding: 'In Dix's Field, fortunately the blitz brought only ruin, not annihilation. Here it would not be a matter of rebuilding, but of repair and rehabilitation. Restoration would be entirely justified.'<sup>101</sup> Sharp was eloquent in his epitaph for what had been lost: 'Mellow brick, cream-painted shutter-hung windows, handsome similar doorways, all repeated equally through the terraces of varying length – here was domestic building of the most civilised refinement and beauty'.<sup>102</sup> (Fig. 20)

## THE LEGACY

Matthew Nosworthy was but one of a number of local builders and architects at work in late Georgian Exeter, but it is his association with the more striking urban set-pieces which has assured the survival of his name despite the paucity of information about his life. The schemes considered in this article were not all completed to the full extent proposed, yet this is illustrative not of an unsuccessful or commercially inept professional career but of the pragmatic nature of the business of a speculative builder in a provincial town of the period. Nosworthy's work was a last hurrah for the brick terrace, however refined, in Exeter, for by the early 1820s other builders and architects had already moved on in their designs for the city's new outer suburbs where, as in other English towns, villas in gardens were becoming the preferred model, and stucco replacing brick for the genteel house, as exemplified by John Brown's Baring Crescent, twelve stuccoed villas arranged around an oval communal pleasure ground, begun as early as 1818,<sup>103</sup> or the seven Classical Revival houses of William Hooper's Chichester Place, on Southernhay East, of 1825, which contrast with Nosworthy's brick terraces across the gardens.

In the absence of a unified grand plan or the financial backing of the Chamber, the Georgian residential development of Exeter was a piecemeal and often interrupted process, although the running commentary provided by the local press and topographical guides illustrates a keen contemporary interest in matters of 'Improvement'. But the necessarily pragmatic approach of these entrepreneurial architect-builder-speculators nevertheless created desirable residential enclaves, which in turn attracted to the city a wealthy, middling sort who themselves went on to contribute both to Exeter's survival and prosperity as regional capital, and to a less tangible but equally important sense of civic well-being. The traveller and author Richard Ford made his home in Southernhay before moving to more Arcadian surroundings in his villa

in the eastern suburb of Heavitree. In 1834 he wrote: 'This Exeter is quite a Capital, abounding in all that London has, except its fog and smoke'.<sup>104</sup>

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Celia Fiennes, transcribed E.W. Griffiths, *Through England on a Side Saddle in the Time of William and Mary* (London, 1888), p. 197.
- 2 Daniel Defoe, *A tour through the whole island of Great Britain, divided into circuits or journies* (3 Vols., London, 1724–27), Vol. I, Letter 3, Part 3.
- 3 Robert Southey (under the pseudonym Don Manuel Alvarez Espriella), *Letters from England* (3rd edition, London, 1814), Vol. I, pp. 25, 26.
- 4 Caroline Stanford, 'Revisiting the Origins of Coade Stone', *Georgian Group Journal*, 24, (2016), p. 96.
- 5 Newton, *Eighteenth-Century Exeter* (Exeter, 1984), p. 65. This and his earlier volume, *Victorian Exeter* (Leicester, 1968), form the most comprehensive recent history of the city over the period.
- 6 W.G. Hoskins, *Exeter Militia List 1803* (London and Chichester, 1972).
- 7 G. Kitson Clark, *The Critical Historian* (London, 1968), p. 154, quoted by Robert Newton in M.A. Simpson and T.H. Lloyd, *Middle Class Housing* (Newton Abbot, 1977), p. 20.
- 8 Parish records for St Pancras, Widecombe-in-the-Moor: Devon Record Office [hereafter DRO] 2995A/PR/1/2.
- 9 The National Archives [hereafter TNA]: Stamp Duty Records, IR 1/62 f 189.
- 10 *Exeter Flying Post* [hereafter *EFP*], 10 April 1788.
- 11 *EFP*, 30 September 1790.
- 12 TNA, IR 1/69 f 187.
- 13 *Besley's Exeter Directory* (Exeter, 1835), pp. 4, 97, 131; *EFP*, 1 July 1853.
- 14 *Exeter and Plymouth Gazette* 12 June 1830.
- 15 His father's last project, Dix's Field: *EFP*, 11 January 1827.
- 16 *EFP*, 23 November 1831.
- 17 DRO 1078/IRW/N/327, (1831).
- 18 Guardians of the Poor and the Improvement Commissioners for Exeter, *Valuation of the Houses and Lands in the City of Exeter*, (Exeter, 1838).

- 19 *Gentleman's Magazine*, 96 (1804), p. 889.
- 20 DRO 1078/IRW/N/329, (1851).
- 21 Nosworthy merits a short entry in Howard Colvin, *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600–1840* (New Haven and London, 2008), p. 754. Other work by him in the city includes the New London Inn, 1794 (demolished 1936), St Sidwell vicarage, of which no trace remains, and possibly Nos. 5–9 Palace Gate near the Cathedral Close, and houses on Salutory Mount (now 24–28 Fore Street).
- 22 John Hooker, *The Antique Description and Account of the City of Exeter*, (Exeter, 1765), quoted in Bertie Wilkinson, *The Mediaeval Council of Exeter*, (Manchester, 1931), p. 47.
- 23 Newton, *Eighteenth-Century Exeter*, pp. 92, 120–128.
- 24 Alexander Jenkins, *The History and Description of the City of Exeter* (Exeter, 1806), p. 213.
- 25 Caroline, Duchess of Marlborough and Robert Palmer, who was Agent for the Bedford Estates.
- 26 DRO L1258M/LL/3/1.
- 27 DRO L1258M/LL/3/4, building leases bundle.
- 28 *Ibid.*, Building Contract between His Grace the Duke of Bedford and Thomas Wills Horrell, 1825.
- 29 Georg Braun and Franz Hogenburg, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (6 vols., Cologne, 1572–1617), Vol. VI.
- 30 Shirley Woolmer, *A Concise Account of the City of Exeter* (2nd edition, Exeter, 1811), p. 11; Jenkins, p. 176.
- 31 DRO 1718A/1/PFW/17, (1700); Z1 50/6/23, (1777).
- 32 Benjamin Donn, *A Map of the County of Devon* (London, 1765); Charles Tozer, *Plan of the City and Suburbs of Exeter* (Exeter, 1793).
- 33 DRO Exeter City Archives [hereafter ECA] Map Book 1, Plate 11.
- 34 Jenkins, p. 203. The site was not in the Chamber's ownership.
- 35 ECA Chamber Act Books B/2/26, 24 October 1774.
- 36 ECA B/2/26, 1 June 1778.
- 37 Jones and Stowey jointly took on an apprentice carpenter in Exeter in 1773: TNA, IR1/58 f156.
- 38 Woolmer, p. 52; DRO A5/166/22; John Martin Robinson, *James Wyatt* (New Haven and London, 2011), p. 331.
- 39 ECA B/2/26, 23 November 1775.
- 40 *Ibid.*, 26 November 1776.
- 41 The British Library: India Office Records IOR/Z/E/4/35/S489.
- 42 ECA B/2/26, 1 June 1778.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 21 August 1782.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 13 February 1783; 12 October 1784; 17 April 1787.
- 45 ECA, Receiver's Account Book 151, f 31.
- 46 ECA, B/2/27, 3 December 1792.
- 47 Nosworthy's plans and elevations have not come to light.
- 48 Chamber Act Books, B/2/27, f 144.
- 49 DRO 3412B/MT/1.
- 50 ECA, B/2/27 3 January 1815, 8 February and 18 April 1826.
- 51 *Ibid.*, B/2/27, f109, 1796. The Chamber was prepared to grant 999-year leases on occasion: *ibid.*, 23 February 1816.
- 52 The city walls incorporated Anglo-Saxon, mediaeval and later elements, but the core was Roman, of the 2nd century: *Historic England List Entry no. 1003858*.
- 53 *Sherborne Mercury*, 2 June 1800.
- 54 *EFP*, 15 October 1801, 29 September 1803, 8 March 1804.
- 55 The success of the western side appears to have encouraged the Chamber: Thomas Gray, appointed Chamber Surveyor in 1792, was instructed in 1803 to form a 'plan of the Ground on which the new Buildings on Southernhay are intended to be made and also Plans and Elevation of the same': ECA, Chamber Minute Book B1/1516 June 1803. This must refer to plots on the eastern side, so far unidentified: Gray's plans have not been found.
- 56 DRO Box 53/6/17–18.
- 57 ECA, B/2/26 10 July 1793.
- 58 *EFP*, 24 May 1792.
- 59 Robert Dymond, 'Exeter and its neighbourhood under George II to George IV', in *EFP*, 12 February 1879.
- 60 *EFP*, 21 November 1805.
- 61 *EFP*, 25 May 1801.
- 62 Jenkins, p. 347.
- 63 T. and H. Besley, *Exeter Itinerary and General Directory*, (Exeter, 1828).
- 64 Jenkins, p. 347.
- 65 The architect is unknown.
- 66 Pevsner, Howard Colvin, and Richardson and Gill in their *Regional Architecture of the West of England*, (London, 1924), all settle for 'probably'.
- 67 Jenkins, p. 386.

- 68 Louisa Colleton Graves, *Desultory Thoughts on Various Subjects*, (Brussels, 1819), pp. 103–4. The original central house is now No. 5.
- 69 *Morning Chronicle*, 25 July 1805.
- 70 *EFF*, 20 September 1804.
- 71 Six houses were offered for sale in the 1827 catalogue for the sale of the Colleton Estate: DRO 60/5/2 (1827). The Turner painting, said to be of the same date, shows a range of eight houses, one with a canopied balcony: J.M.W. Turner, *Exeter*, Manchester City Art Galleries, Acc. TW0590.
- 72 Their Portland stone staircases are frequently referred to in advertisements: *Morning Chronicle*, 6 June 1812.
- 73 Jenkins, pp. 385–6.
- 74 DRO 53/6/1 (1777).
- 75 *EFF*, 28 January 1796.
- 76 *Staffordshire Advertiser*, 21 April 1798.
- 77 *Western Times*, 14 January 1888.
- 78 *Western Luminary*, 10 January 1815.
- 79 *EFF*, 9 July 1818.
- 80 *EFF*, 27 May 1824.
- 81 *EFF*, 11 January 1827.
- 82 The Georgian Group, London, Casework Archives, Box 31.
- 83 Andrew Byrne, *Bedford Square, an Architectural Study* (London, 1990), pp. 26–30; 70–75. Gladys Scott Thomson, *The Russells in Bloomsbury* (London, 1940), p. 367.
- 84 DRO L1258M/LL/3/1 (1773).
- 85 *Etchings of Coadé's Artificial Stone Manufacture, Lambeth*, British Library copy 1802.b.24. Illustrated in Byrne, p. 66, fig. 52.
- 86 Examples from 1792–1815 are illustrated in Byrne, *London's Georgian Houses* (London 1986), pp. 35, 41, 90, 92.
- 87 Rachel Stewart, *The Town House in Georgian London* (London and New Haven, 2009), plate 38.
- 88 Caroline Stanford, 'Revisiting the Origins of Coadé Stone', in *The Georgian Group Journal* 24 (2016), p. 96.
- 89 Alison Kelly, *Mrs. Coadé's Stone*, (Upton-on-Severn, 1990), includes a Gazetteer by county.
- 90 TNA, C111/106.
- 91 *Ibid.*, Day Book. Probably the Thomas Horrell who completed Bedford Circus; for Robert Cornish see Colvin, p. 275.
- 92 Stanford, p. 107.
- 93 TNA, C111/106, Day Book and Nominal Ledger.
- 94 Such as that at No. 2 Southernhay, and possibly the Coadé 'Laughing Philosopher' model: Kelly, p. 160.
- 95 Similar to one illustrated by Kelly at p. 158.
- 96 At Nos. 14–16 Southernhay West, for example.
- 97 The façades of the Bedford Circus houses were left standing, only to be taken down by the city authorities: Gavin Stamp, *Britain's Lost Cities* (London, 2007), p. 76.
- 98 The seven houses of the northern range (Nos. 3–9) survived until 1969, when the City Council demolished them, their Grade II\* status notwithstanding, as part of the scheme to build a new Civic Centre: Georgian Group Casework Archives, Box 31.
- 99 Thomas Sharp, *Exeter Phoenix: A Plan for Rebuilding* (London, 1946), p. 41.
- 100 *Ibid.*, p. 35.
- 101 *Ibid.*, pp. 101–2.
- 102 *Ibid.*, p. 38.
- 103 DRO 1926B/B/E/5/21/1–3, 1818.
- 104 R.E. Prothero, *The Letters of Richard Ford 1797–1858* (London, 1905), p. 135.