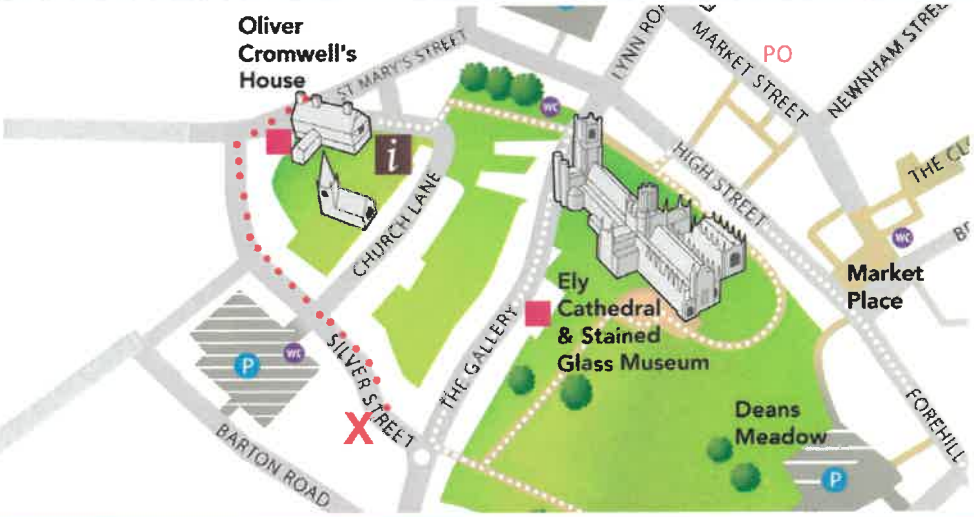
heritage open days

Silver Street Cottages, Ely



Heritage Open Days

Discover unique buildings and Ely's historic past

Friday 11th , Saturday 12th, Sunday 13th September 2020

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Visit Ely

heritage open days

Welcome to Ely Heritage Open Weekend 2020

Sadly this year we are unable to open the Silver Street Cottages due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Instead we have created this guide to enable you to find out more about what lies behind those intriguing walls. Visit Ely would like to thank Steuart Northfield for his wonderful photos and information on no.9 Silver Street. During the recent renovations at no.7 an animal trough has been uncovered; these cottages continue to give up their secrets again and again. We hope you enjoy discovering these fascinating buildings that make up part of Ely's fabulous heritage.

Anna Bennett
Tourism and Town Centre Manager
Visit Ely

Timbered cottages in Silver Street, Ely. Once one house. There are 14th century paintings inside. Image: Ely Cambridgeshire Community Archive Network

Silver Street Cottages and the discovery of 14th Century domestic wall paintngs on plaster

The six tenements, now four cottages in Silver Street, Ely, were left to the Cambridgeshire Cottage Improvement Society in 1977; when the middle two became vacant, we took the opportunity to renovate and update all four (grade II listed).

We knew we had a medieval building, apparently (and unusually for this area) of Wealden type with a fine crown post in the attic; the character and detailing of the frame suggested a late fifteenth or early sixteenth century date. Soot on the crown post and on the plaster at high level provided clear evidence of an original open fire. Shortly afterwards, another timber framed bay had been added to the west cross wing, with a jetty in the gable wall and to the street. In the sixteenth century, an upper floor was inserted in the hall space, and the front wall was built out with a jetty flush with those of the crosswings; a chimney stack was built at about the same time in the area of the cross passage, and a gabled brick wall with chimney and a stepped parapet was added to the solar cross-wing. This chimney also serves the cottage to the east, whose walls are salvaged medieval stonework. In the nineteeth century the timber framed building was divided into four cottages, and its whole front was underbuilt in brick.

Our renovation scheme involved opening up the original open hail as a single first floor space open to the roof, leaving the central cottage with one bedroom only (but some bedroom!); this was made possible by taking out a later staircase, 'borrowing' another staircase from the next cottage, and contriving a bathroom in a previously inaccessible boxroom. The resulting units were hardly conventional housing association material, but our application for funding went in to the Housing Corporation and proceeded without problems. This was late in 1987, and while our listed building consent and funding applications were being considered, the architect John Wisbey started pulling away wallpaper to examine the timber frame before drawing up a detailed specification.

To his and our surprise, wall paintings were revealed, first in the 'solar' space and then on a ground floor wall of what had been the open hall. The discovery prompted mixed reactions of pleasure at finding something special, and horror at the potential financial implications. In my own case, there was also a strong

feeling of the biter being bit, as I had recently been involved as Conservation Officer in insisting on the saving of a seventeenth century painted room, discovered during renovation of a house in South Cambridgeshire, which led to major financial problems for the owners as well as long delays.

The potential costs were very worrying for the Society, whose rent income is low, and which has little working capital. It was lucky that a painting conservator was working at the cathedral nearby; the Society agreed to pay for her to carry out a survey at a cost of £650. This showed that the paintings were very early and rare, and suggested that the costs of repairing them would be high.

We contacted English Heritage, and Jan Keevil of its Conservation Studio came out very quickly; while he confirmed the importance of the paintings, he could not answer the vital questions: could we get a grant, if so how much, and what would English Heritage advise us to do if we could not get a grant? To support our grant application, we sought the views of Clive Rouse and of David Park, Director of the Courtauld Institute's Conservation of Wail Paintings Department. Both confirmed the importance of the paintings, but the only grant offer we received towards their repair came from East Cambridgeshire District Council (£2500 in addition to the Housing Act grants the Council had already offered). We finally heard from English Heritage that we would not get a grant nearly 18 months after the discovery of the paintings and Jan Keevil's visit. In the meantime, the Housing Corporation had approved funding for the renovation of the four cottages.

An excerpt from a case study by John Preston, then Conservation Officer for Cambridgeshire County Council and nominated onto the management committee of a local housing association.

A detail from the wall painting in no.9 photo: Steuart Northfield

Cambridge Cottage Improvement Society Chronicle
Dating and Historical Significance

Number 9

When the vine-scroll ornament in number 9 is compared with 15th-century examples of scrollwork, such as that on the screen of St Oswald's Chapel in Peterborough Cathedral, it is apparent that the latter is altogether looser and more stylised. The Ely painting is, however, immediately reminiscent of the almost identical vine-scrolls which appear in 14th-century wall paintings elsewhere in East Anglia, in the church of little Witchingham in Norfolk. At Little Witchingham one finds the same crisp, naturalistic scrollwork - even down to details such as the tendrils. Although the bunches of grapes at Little Witchingham were painted freehand, the leaves appear to have been stencilled, and this may also have been the case at Ely.

Close detail of the Vine-scroll

The Little Witchingham workshop was probably also responsible for the paintings in the nearby church of Weston Longville, where similar scrollwork appears in the great Tree of Jesse painting in tp.e north aisle. The Weston Longville paintings have been dated to the 1340s, and a dating of the Ely vinescroll to the middle or second half of the 14th century would not only agree with these stylistically comparable paintings but would also be entirely

appropriate from the point of view of technique. Evidence is continuously accumulating that the techniques of medieval wall paintings are often more complex than has tended to be supposed.

Analysis of this painting at Ely, undertaken with the help of Jo Darrah of the Victoria and Albert Museum and Helen Howard of the British Museum, is now adding further data along these lines. Pigment samples have been examined in both cross-section and dispersion under a polarising microscope; red lead has been provisionally identified in the grapes, and both red lead and vermilion in the vine stem. Interestingly, the green used for the leaves seem to have been achieved with a mixture of indigo and yellow ochre, and possibly umber and white. Indigo is a vegetable dye, sometimes used in Gothic wall painting, despite its susceptibility to fading - for instance, it has recently been identified in the late 14th-century paintings in the chapter house of Westminster Abbey. The use of indigo, red lead and vermilion provides persuasive circumstantial evidence for the use of one or more organic media.

Early stages of uncovering

Number 7

The paintings in number 7 are clearly much later, though the tradition of using birds in secular decoration goes back well into antiquity. Naturalistic birds appear in the Longthorpe Tower paintings of c.1330, though there they have no scrolls, and are strictly confined to the dado zone, or other marginal areas. A closer parallel to Ely is provided by birds such as those found in the Sherborne Missal, of the beginning of the 15th century, where, for example 'a heron' is represented and carries that identifying label. The Ely inscriptions are much more interesting, in that an appropriate motto, in English, is provided for each species: the dove has 'Deale Justlye'; the heron, apparently, 'Bear no Malice'; and the peacock, 'Be not Proud'.

Much closer comparisons for the Ely birds are provided by works of the late 15th and 16th centuries. For example, the wall paintings - partly discovered in the 1970s - in the Dominican Friary at Beverley, painted in part of the domestic accommodation, and datable to c.1510, where there are blackbirds, perhaps symbolising the black friars, each with an inscription 'Jesu Mercy'. On the ceiling of the Prior's Room at Carlisle, again of about 1510, birds are represented with scrolls reading 'Simon Senus prior, on whose soul God have mercy', and with the persorial motto 'Simon lathe to offend'.

Conservator at work

Fully uncovered and preserved Wall showing the position of the birds

However, the best parallels for the Ely scheme are in late 15th and early 16th century stained glass, where there are various examples of birds with appropriate inscriptions, sometimes in English. At Ketteringham Church, Norfolk, a cock is depicted with the proud inscription 'REY'.

The inscriptions in the borders at the top of the paintings both on the first floor and ground floor are very damaged, and have not yet been adequately deciphered. If any of them is a biblical text, then this would help with the dating of the paintings - depending on whether, for example, they follow the 'Great Bible' of 1539. However, the only inscription which has been partially deciphered, on the first floor, appears to begin 'Be sober at ... ', and the general moralising tenor of this and the birds' inscriptions would fit well with other 16th- and 17th-century secular wall paintings.

The 'Be sober' inscription at Ely is more likely to refer to general sobriety of conduct than specifically to the evils of drink, though, as noted above, the

latter type of inscription does occur in the Yarnton glass, which may possibly have come from a house rather than an inn. A recently discovered painting in a house in Harwich, datable to c.1500 on costume and other grounds, has an inscription which, in modernised English, reads, 'Sore I sigh and make my moan, the shrine is here, but the body is gone', a rather irreverent way of indicating that the speaker has finished the contents of the barrel on his left. As far as the precise dating of the paintings in number 7 is concerned, further work needs to be done on this. Their overall format, with an inscription band

Before conservation

"Bear no Malice" Heron

Close detail of the foliage motif

at the top, and motifs set within foliage in the main field, clearly derives from contemporary tapestries. As noted above, the birds with mottoes are particularly well paralleled in works of the late 15th and early 16th centuries, and it is tempting to date the Ely paintings to not later than c.1530. On the other hand, there are many secular wall paintings with inscription borders of this type, sometimes including interlace ornament as appears at Ely, which are assigned to the later 16th century or even to c.1600, though none located thus far provides an exact parallel. On the whole, such a late dating of the Ely paintings, seems unlikely.

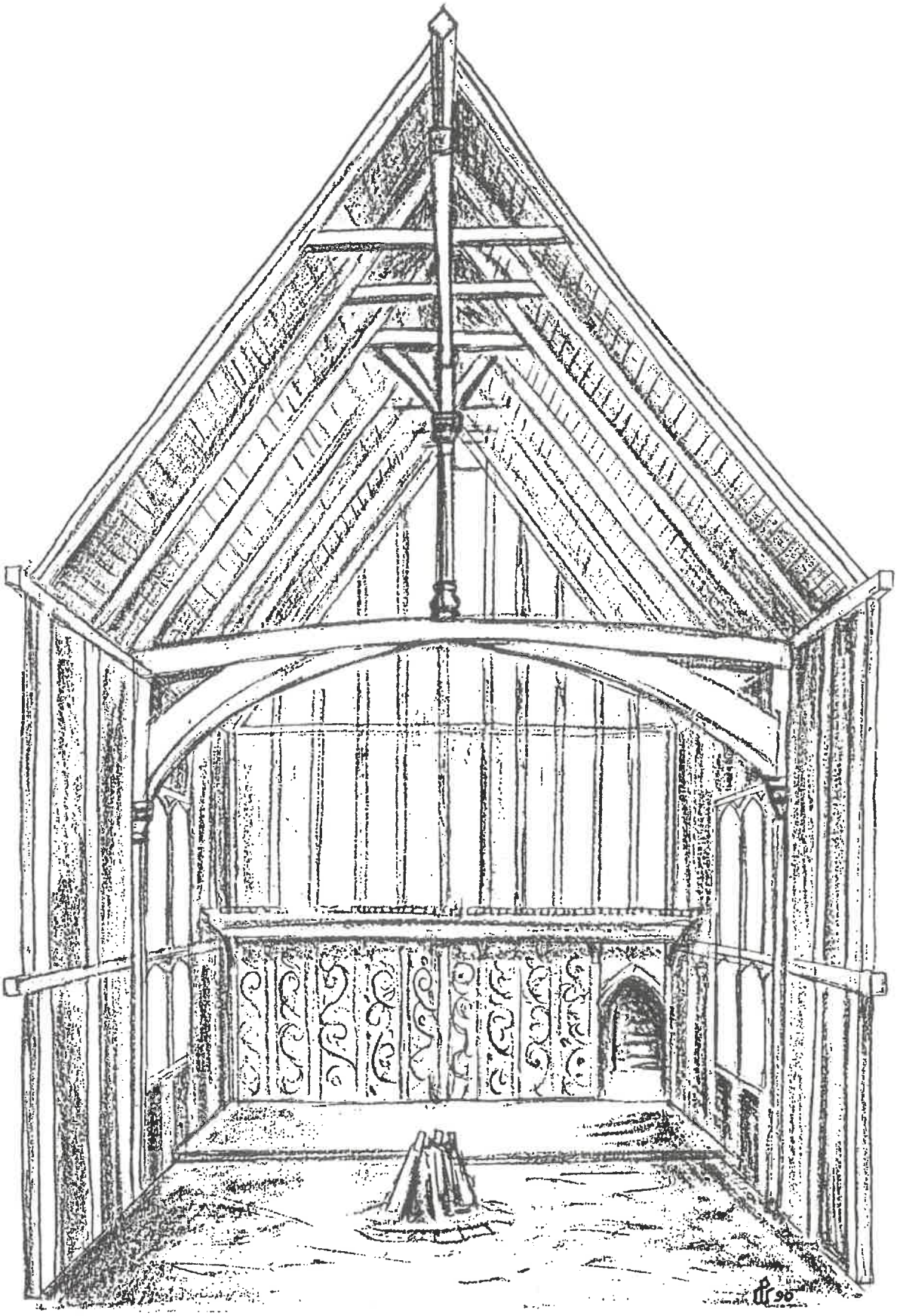
"Be not Proud" Peacock

"Deale Justlye" Dove

Relation to the Architectural Context

Number 9 retains its magnificent crown-post roof and it is clear that the three cottages, numbers 7, 9 and 11, represent the three basic units of a late medieval hall house. The present division into separate dwellings presumably occurred in the 19th century, when the ground floor facade attained its current appearance. In the reconstruction proposed for the original house, number 7 would have been the parlour with solar above, number 9 the hall with open hearth, and number 11 the buttery and pantry with chamber above.

This arrangement, with a recessed open cross-hall and projecting family and service wings, for which there is evidence at the rear of the building, shows the house to have been of typical, town-adapted 'Wealden' type, though it is also clear from the roof that this was gabled rather than hipped, as is more usual.



Proposed reconstruction of original house showing location of vine-scroll painting by Peter Welford

The vine-scroll decoration, then, would originally have appeared at the dais end of the hall, and served as a fictive textile 'backdrop' in front of which the owner and his family would have sat while dining. Joist holes in the uprights between the painted areas indicate that there was probably originally a canopy above. Two suggested reconstructions of the original appearance of the hall show the dais end, with canopy, and doorway leading to the parlour; and a view in the opposite direction looking towards the service end.

Regarding the later paintings, the decoration in number 7 is in what were originally the two private rooms: the parlour and solar. The painting is clearly coeval with a remodelling of the house in the 16th century, which also saw: the addition of what is now number 13; the subdivision of the open hall; and the insertion of stone newel stairs, and of two chimney stacks with associated fireplaces. The house lost its recessed open hall, and the first floor became the continuous jettied storey which survives today, albeit with later fenestration. A conjectural reconstruction of the house as it would have appeared in the 16th century, can be compared with Paycocke's House, Coggeshall, of about 1500, which, though rather grander and much restored, gives a good impression of this type of house with continuous jettied storey. Parallels such as Paycocke's certainly suggest that the 16th-century alterations, and the coeval wall painting, could have been done earlier rather than later in the century.

Fully uncovered and preserved wall

As the name suggests, houses of the Wealden type are especially characteristic of the south-eastern counties. There are two well-known examples in Sussex - the late 14th-century Clergy House at Alfriston, and the probably slightly later Pilgrim's Rest at Battle - both showing the recessed hall and projecting side wings. Increasingly, though, Wealden houses are being found in other areas, and several examples have now been identified in Cambridgeshire.

The question is: how early is the Ely example. One recent view is that it looks to be of c.1500; another, that the original house already existed by 1400. The newly exposed vine-scroll decoration has particularly close parallels in East Anglian paintings of the middle or third quarter of the 14th century, and although it may be somewhat later than the similar examples cited, it is highly unlikely that it is later than c.1400. This would make the house a very early - and therefore exciting - example of the Wealden type.

The crown-post roof in number 9, now above an inserted first floor, is encrusted with soot, testifying to the open hearth which originally serviced the room, and the crenellated crown-post seems entirely possible for a date around 1400. The base of the crown post is rather bulbous, and therefore does not appear likely to be as early as the mid 14th century; again, though, a dating of c.1400 would seem plausible. The tie-beam of the roof was carried on braces, now lost, though their crenellated capitals still survive. As well as the usual construction marks in Roman numerals, a carpenter's mark survives on one of the rafters. It would be interesting to determine if this mark exists elsewhere in monastic or other buildings at Ely.

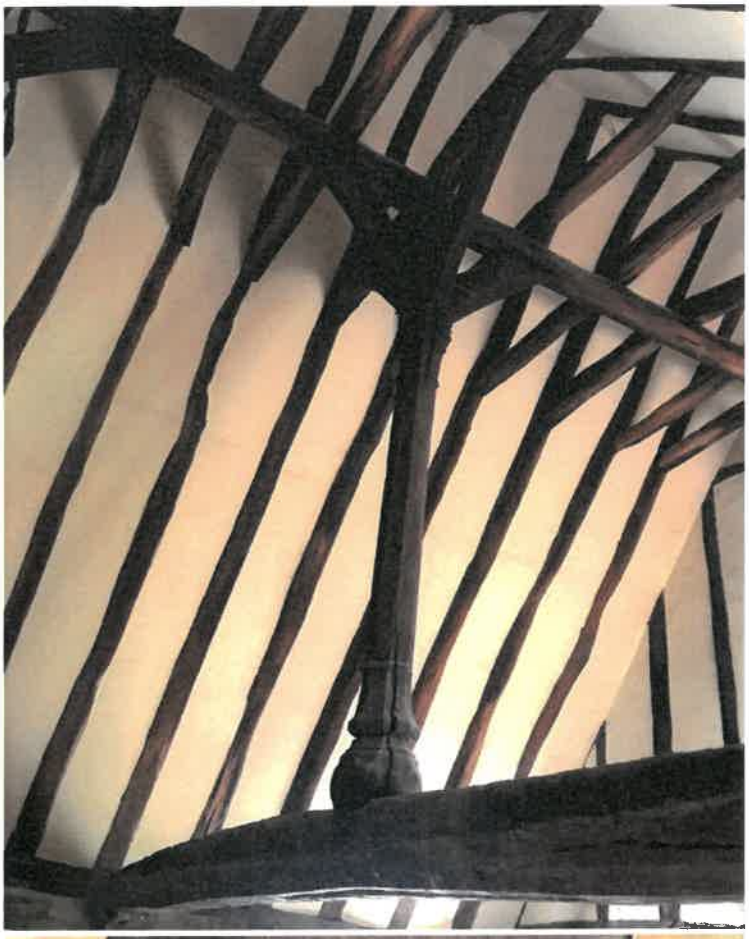
Number 9 today - photos & notes: Mr Steuart Northfield

The first picture shows the structure of the original Hall House number 9 being the main Hall. The second picture shows No 5 to the left, a Barn house and to the far right an additional house which now forms part of No 11

The beams in the Hall part of the house are more refined than those at either end and are supported by a magnificent Crown Post

Although having a rather bulbous base the top has been intricately carved

The channels along the main beam would have housed an arched screen resting on two finely carved posts



Exposed Wattle and Daub

The interior walls of the Hall are constructed using Wattle and Daub as can be seen in the exposed patch of walls on which the paintings are on and the upstairs bedroom wall

The wall painting depicts a Grape Vine and bunches of grapes, leaves and tendrils can still be clearly seen

Although there are no known records of the owner of the house, at the time the painting was done it has been argued that he may have been a wine merchant

Wine was very important both for the Monastery and the local community

There are well documented records of vineyards within Ely with one area still known as The Vineyards

This picture shows the full length of the wall painting Two sections to the left have been lost and the white section to the right is an infill. This would have been the way into the Solar and Parlour which now form No 7

The fireplace was added in the 16th Century and features typical Herringbone brickwork of the period. There is no evidence of a bread oven which the cottages either side still retain. Although no longer in use the fireplace is a great drinks store

Although No 9 contains wonderful features that are rightly of historic importance, it is still a home and has been used to hold large parties just as it would have when first constructed

Stone carvings in the gardens

It is not known how the female head sculpture ended up in the gardens of the cottages

I think the corresponding male head can still be seen on a buttress at the back of Queen's Hall and Bishops House leading to the Cathedrals South Door

No 5 Silver Street was built in the 16th century most probably using stone from the Monastic buildings and maybe the female head was removed during this period due to the Reformation

For whatever reason she ended up in the garden she has remained in very good condition whereas the male has suffered from being exposed to the elements

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City Centre

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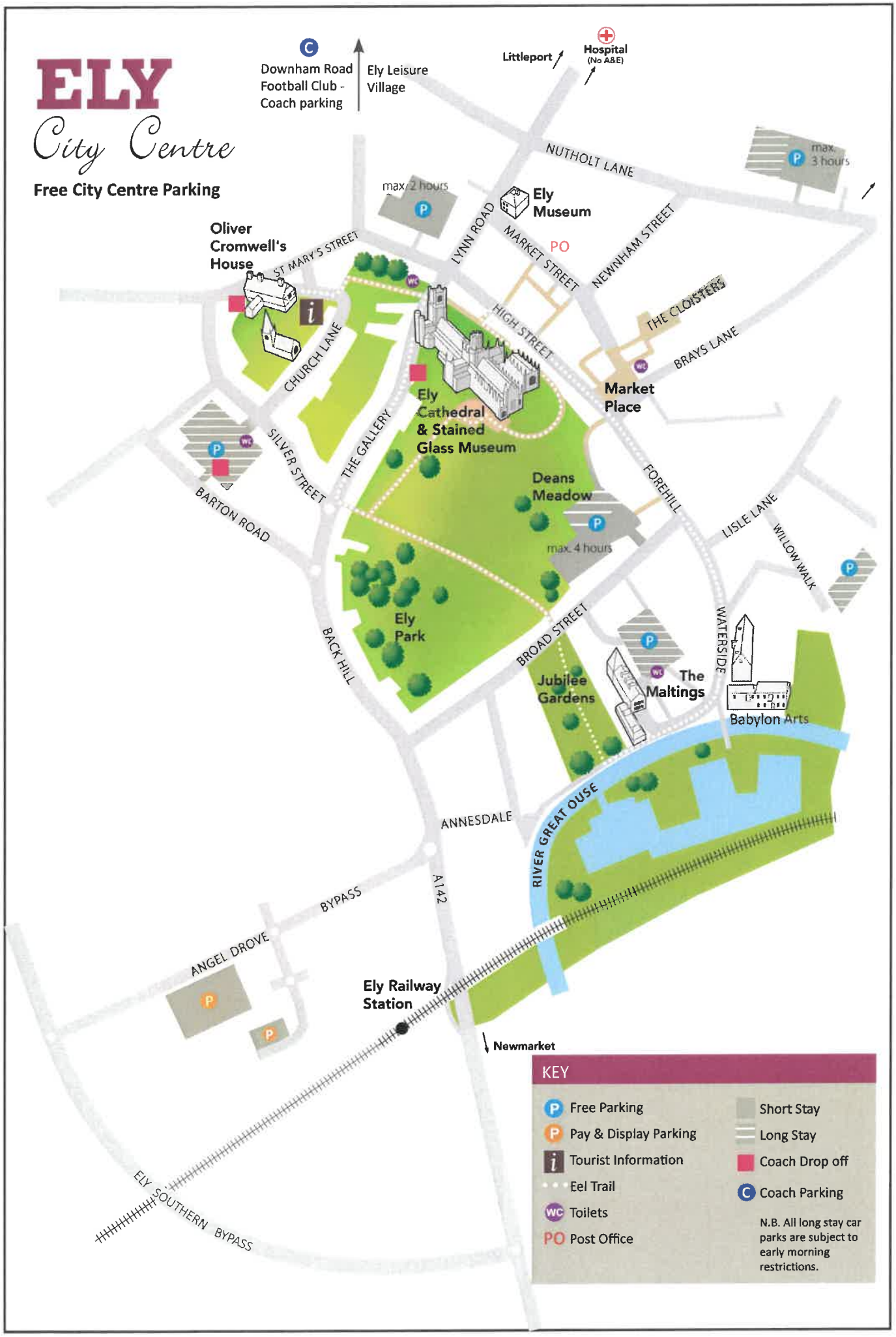

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