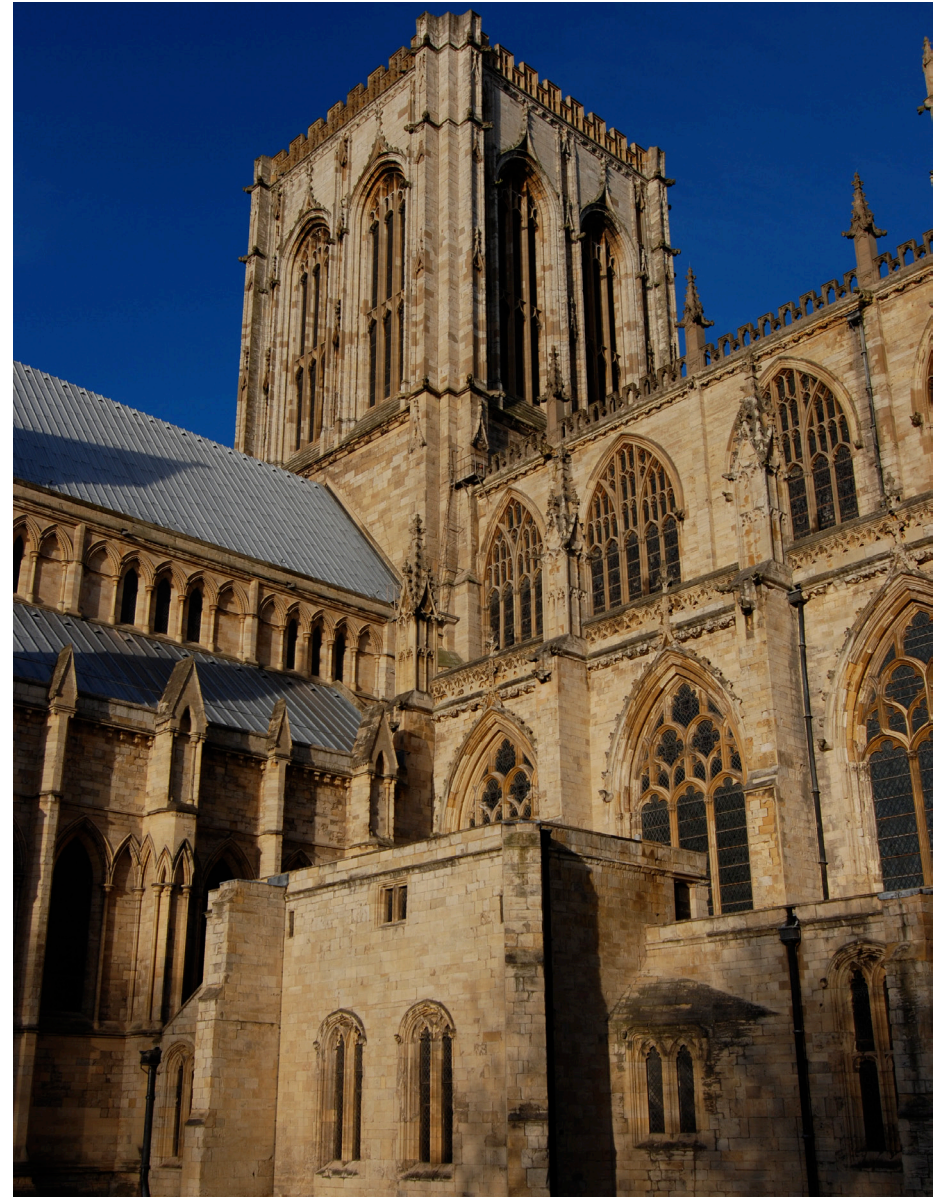


# Character Area Nine: The Minster Precinct



## Overview

A Precinct is one of the defining features of the medieval English cathedral. It comprises an enclosure, filled by housing, communal facilities and administrative buildings. Originally subject to independent jurisdiction, they are often places of great charm and beauty. Some, notably Salisbury, are extensive and retain a strong sense of otherness behind their walls and gates. On the other hand York's Precinct has evolved into a less formal and less separate place, though one which nonetheless has a distinctive character of its own. It is also a place of contrast: whilst the north side retains much of its historic seclusion and is marked by green openness, to the south of the Minster the walls and gates have come down. Here the city comes right up against the Minster and the streets, cleared of traffic, throng in the summer with the millions who come to see one of the greatest buildings in Europe.

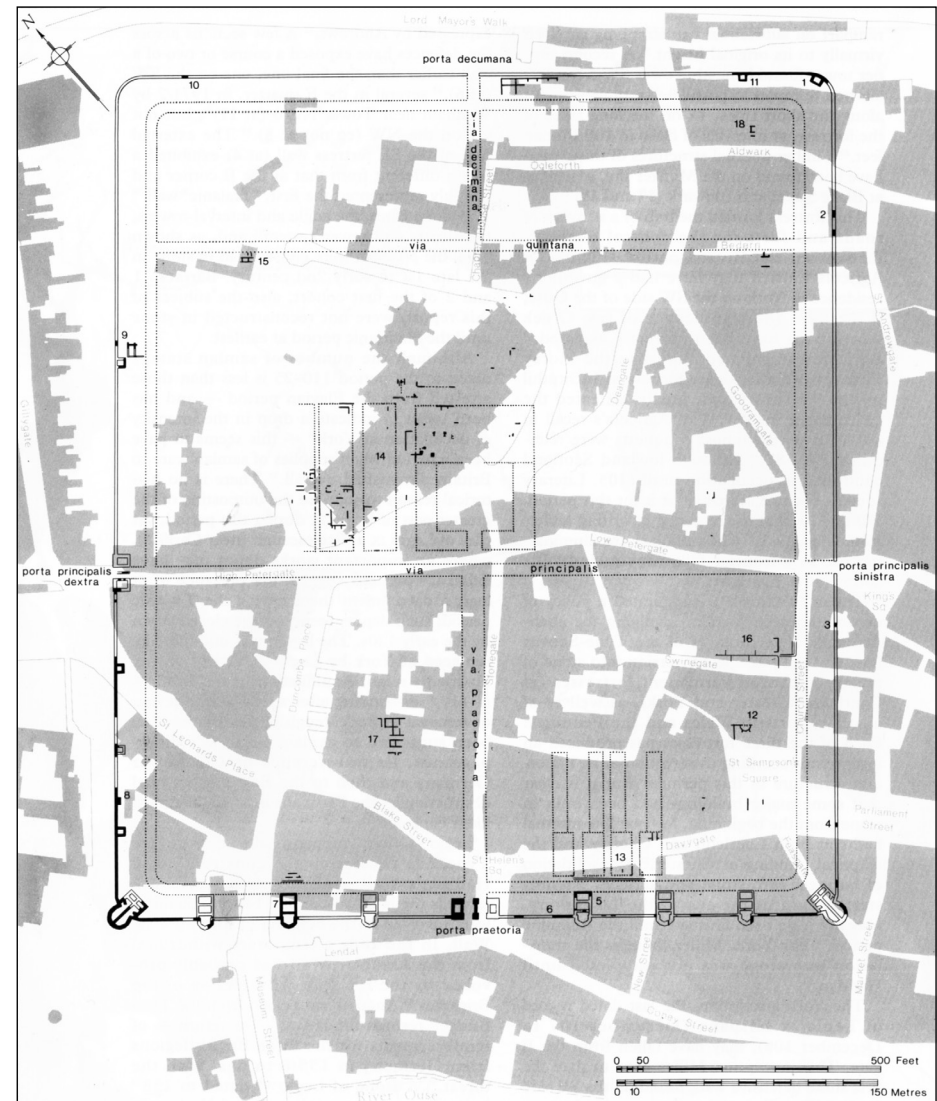
### Boundaries

Broadly speaking the boundary follows the historic ones of the Precinct: the city walls to the north and Petergate and the back of Goodramgate to the south. However, there is an extension south along Duncombe Place, a Victorian creation which has in effect become part of the Precinct.

### Historical development

#### *Pre Conquest*

The Precinct occupies a substantial chunk of the northern half of the legionary fortress, including its wall. Part of the 'principia' - the fortress Head Quarters - is exposed in the crypt of the Minster, and this diagram shows how this and the Roman street pattern relates to the present plan.



*The Roman fortress showing the relationship with the modern street plan and the Minster (grey)*

It is supposed that this was the location of the 7th century Minster, though no evidence of it has yet been found. If so, this would have established the idea of a Precinct with other buildings relating to the operation of the Minster, ranging from the Bishop's palace to houses and communal facilities for the cathedral clergy, gathered around the church.

#### *Middle Ages*

A mighty new Minster was erected by the Normans, only for it to be completely rebuilt in the 13th to 15th centuries on an even bigger scale to create the building we see now - the largest Gothic building north of the Alps.

Relatively little is known about the Precinct before the 13<sup>th</sup> century, though it is clear that under the new Norman archbishops its facilities were extensively renewed, just as the Minster itself was. A ditch enclosed an area that essentially preserved the layout of the Roman fortress. A century later (1283), the Dean and Chapter were granted a royal licence to replace the ditch with a twelve-foot high wall and gates, to protect clergy and property. Enclosure was also a symbol of the jurisdiction and privileges of the 'liberty of St Peter', and a means by which they could be enforced.

Nothing of the two gates on Petergate and that on Ogleforth survives, and only a simple late 16<sup>th</sup> or early 17<sup>th</sup> century timber-framed entranceway of the one on College Street. Its context has been dramatically altered since the end of the 19th century by the demolition of adjacent buildings.

Of the medieval buildings of the Precinct only fragments survive: parts of the Archbishop's Palace to the north (including his chapel, now the Minster Library) and to the east examples of the clergy housing (parts of the Treasurer's House and its northern neighbour, and St William's College) which once ringed the Minster from east to west.



*The surviving Precinct Gateway on Goodramgate*

*Transforming the Precinct, c.1550-1950*

Since the Reformation, the 'otherness' of the Precinct has diminished dramatically. This has occurred at two related levels. First, the ecclesiastical use has diminished: in 1660, for example, only the Dean retained his own residence, although today a number of properties are once again used by clergy and staff. Second, clearance and landscaping have transformed the setting of the Minster in order to create an 'appropriate' backcloth for the viewing and admiration of a building that was increasingly recognised as monument of great beauty, antiquity and importance. However, though these processes mean that the character of the north and south parts of the Precinct has changed quite radically, the contrast between the two areas remains unambiguous.

The northern part of the Precinct was transformed by the gradual eradication of the Archbishop's Palace to create what became Dean's Park in the 19th century functioning not only as a public park (this area was built up in the middle ages).

Around the edge of the park, a number of new buildings were erected such as the Gothic 'New Residence' of 1824-7 housed the 'Canons Residentiary'. It later became part of the Purey Cust Hospital, built against it in 1913.

South of the Minster, secular occupants and worldly activity replaced the clerics, and the building stock was rebuilt to suit. Petergate, for example became one of the most prosperous streets in York in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, lined with reconstructed and modernised shops and houses, though many retained medieval basements. The encroachment of trade and commerce was carried up to the walls of the Minster itself: in 1633 Charles I criticised shops that had been built up against the South Transept in the 1570s and west end in the 1580s.



*The public space at the west end of The Minster was created in phases in the 19th century by demolishing houses and shops*

These were the first of many houses to be demolished in Minster Yard east and west of the Minster to open up views of it. Most of this took place in the 19th century, creating College Green and the space outside the west front. The most dramatic change was the creation of Duncombe Place in the 1860s, the climax of a brand new route across Lendal Bridge from the station which opened up spectacular new views of the west front.

In 1903, the approach from the station was made a through route by the creation of Deangate between Minster Yard and Goodramgate. The cumulative impact of these townscape changes was for the first time to peel back development from the Minster and open up unprecedented views of it on the south, west and east sides. As with other great medieval cathedrals at this time, the Minster was now unequivocally a matter of pride. In the process, however, the sense on these sides of the Minster that there had ever been a defined Precinct separate from the rest of the City was completely lost (though, of course, a sense of seclusion remains on the north side).

#### *The precinct since 1950*

The greatest post-war change to the Precinct was the closure of Deangate to motor vehicles in 1989, although at present the carriageway remains in situ. Lord Esher proposed fundamental reform of the Precinct to create a paved pedestrian space, but that idea has yet to be realised.

#### **Ambience and use**

Because of the quality of the surroundings and the absence of traffic, the Precinct is a wonderful place for pedestrians. These include not just tourists and other visitors to the Minster, but locals walking into the city from Bootham Bar.

Uses are very varied: not just the Minster, but two other churches, a library, school, hotel, stoneyard, offices, a conference centre (St William's College), National Trust properties (Treasurer's House and precinct gateway on College Street), shops and restaurants and quite a number of houses.

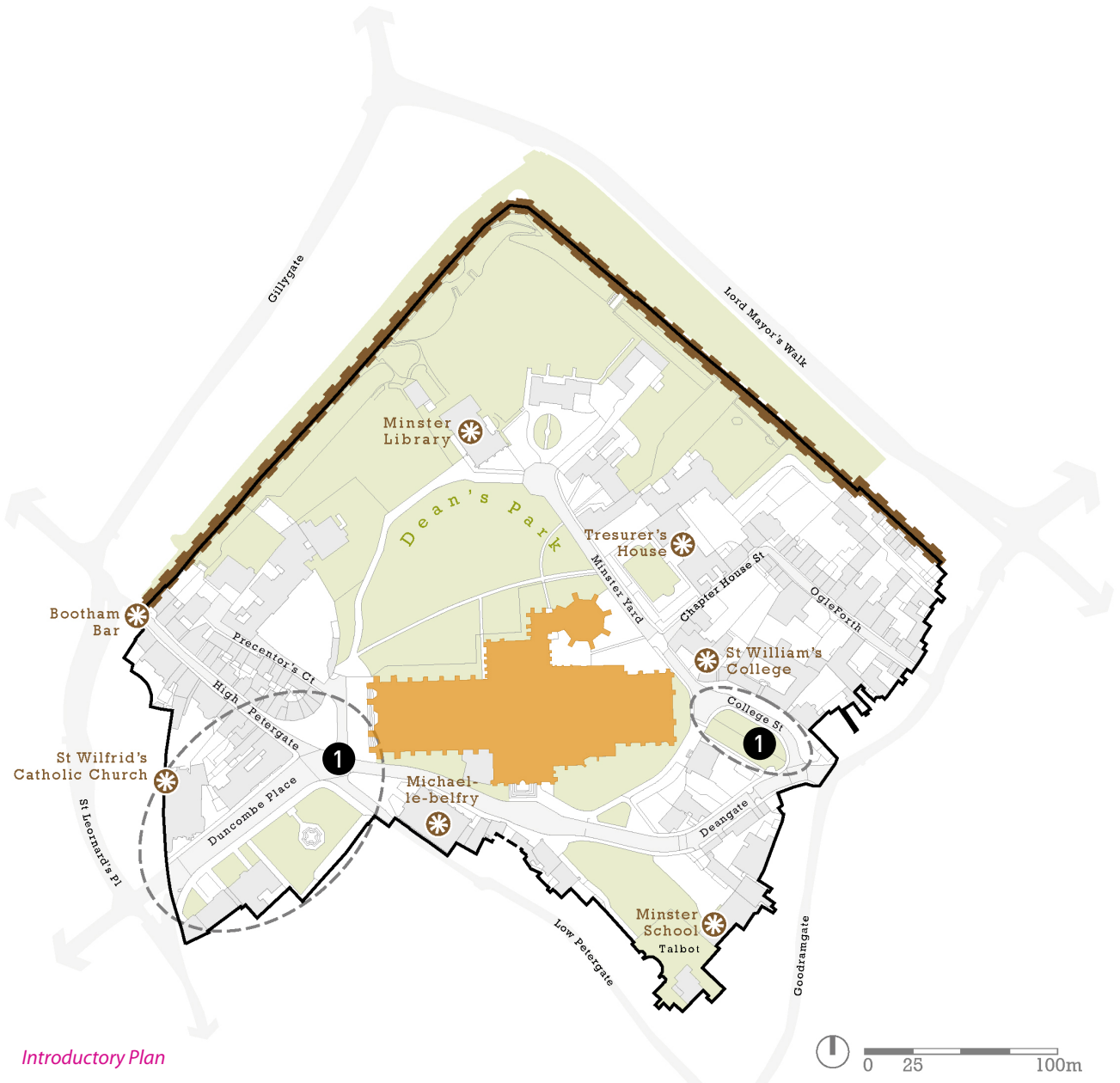
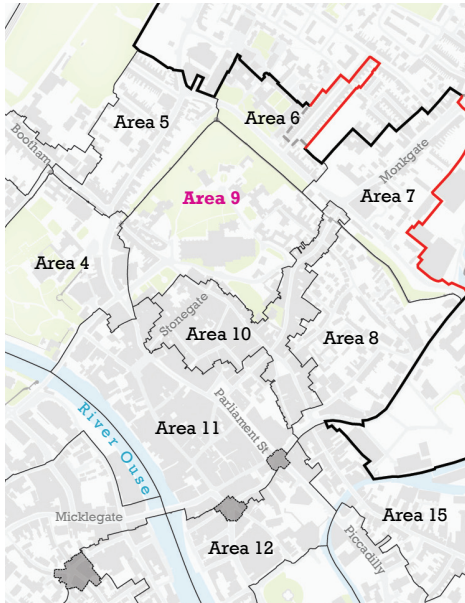


*Duncombe Place*

Part One: Understanding the City > Character Areas > Nine: The Minster Precinct

- 1 19th century civic improvement and creation of views
- ✳ Landmark
- City Wall
- York Minster
- Character Area boundary

Area 9 Location plan








Introductory Plan

## Designations

Not surprisingly, a very high percentage of buildings in this area are listed, and quite a number are Grade I. In addition a number buildings of merit have been identified – the former Purey Cust Hospital, the Minster Stoneyard and houses in Ogleforth. No detractors are identified, though the tower of St Wilfrid's Catholic Church detracts from one of the finest views in the city – up Duncombe Place to the Minster.

Because of the outstanding archaeological importance of the area, most of the ground and the deposits within it are designated a Scheduled Ancient Monument.

-  Scheduled Ancient Monument
-  Grade I Listed Building
-  Grade II\* Listed Building
-  Grade II Listed Building
-  Building of merit
-  Detractor
-  Character Area boundary



Designation Plan

## Streets & Spaces

There are some streets here that are of a form familiar from other parts of the conservation area, such as the intimate, tightly enclosed High Petergate.

However, most of the Precinct has a very distinctive character which sets it apart from the rest of the historic core - reflecting its history as a separate place within the city, under separate jurisdiction and with a very specific function.

Today, the character of the Precinct splits in to two contrasting parts. North of the Minster it retains much of its historic seclusion and is marked by broad, green openness, and an almost complete absence of roads. Dean's Park is the largest green space within the city walls, and though owned by the Minster, it is managed and treated as a public park.



*Dean's Park, Minster Library and the Deanery from the Minster's Crossing Tower*

South of the cathedral, the narrow streets of the city centre come up almost to the walls of the Minster itself, and are separated only by a necklace of roads and modest, informal paved spaces. This is more open than it once was: in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries many buildings were cleared away to open up the setting of the Minster at the east end (creating College Green) and the west. Here, Duncombe Place was driven through to open up direct views of the west end for the first time. It is an odd place, half street, half public space with the gardens and memorials on one side.

With the opening of Deangate at the beginning of the 20th century, a through route was created from Museum Street via Minster Yard to Goodramgate, right passed the Minster. This was closed to traffic in 1989 but most remains tarmaced and marked out for traffic. However, on the north side of the Minster there is a good survival of historic paving and cobbled surfaces (e.g., Chapter House Street) as well as some very fine Victorian iron railings at the entrances to Dean's Park.



*Despite being closed to traffic 20 years ago, Minster Yard and Deansgate Yard are still marked out as highways*

## Buildings

The architecture of this area is of course dominated by the Minster, one of the greatest Gothic buildings in Europe. The church has exerted a powerful influence over the architectural character of the area because most of it was and still is owned by the Minster, and most buildings were either built to support the Minster in one way or other – such as grand medieval homes for the clergy including the remains of the Archbishop's Palace (now Library), 9-13 Minster Court and the Treasurer's House - or developed by it, as on the corner of High Petergate.

It is not surprising therefore that Gothic is a common style, both for genuine medieval buildings such as St Michael-le-Belfrey, but also for the more important buildings that the church built in the 19th century – such as the Minster School and the New Residence (later part of the Purey-Cust Hospital). These are all of Magnesian limestone: its widespread use is one of the distinctive characteristics of the Precinct. St William's College has the most sophisticated timber-



*St William's College*

framed building in the city, and as a building type – large purpose built accommodation for Chantry Priests – unique in the country.

By contrast, more modest domestic buildings are built of brick and are simple in style. The Precinct has the usual Georgian houses and shops, but also the highest concentration of 17th century architecture in the city – including the remodelling of the Treasurer's House, the striking Dutch House in Ogleforth, with carved-brick detailing, and the delightful houses in Precentors Court, which still have original but now very rare timber 'casement' windows.

The architecture of Duncombe Place – a late 19th century creation – is quite different: large blocks in a variety of other materials, predominantly Gothic but different variations of the style. They include St Wilfrid's Catholic church, a sadly lumpen and uninspiring intruder into the superb view of the west front of the Minster the Victorians created from Museum Street.



*Surviving casement windows in Precentors Court*

## Traffic & Movement

This is one of the character areas that is virtually free from traffic due to the City Walls being on two sides, the Footstreets on the other sides, and much of the area in between being privately owned by the Church. This makes it one of the most pleasurable places in the city for a pedestrian.

Parking is an issue in two places: along High Petergate, which is very narrow and where the cars detract from the charming townscape seen and view of the Bar, and on the north side of the Minster, where pressure for parking spaces for Minster staff has resulted in a temporary carpark over part of the gardens next to the Library. The future of this should be resolved because this is a highly sensitive location between elements of the former medieval Archbishop's Palace in the shadow of the City Walls.



*Pedestrians and cyclists in Minster Yard*

## Issues & Opportunities

### Strengths

This character area has tremendous inherent strengths:

- the Minster and the extraordinary array of historic buildings around it
- superb views and charming streets
- Dean's Park - the largest green space within the City Walls
- the absence of traffic

### Weaknesses and opportunities

There are two main weaknesses:

#### *1) the quality of the spaces and streets on the south side of the Minster:*

The Victorians opened up the southern side of the Minster for it to be admired, but then expanded Minster Yard into a major thoroughfare - Duncombe Place to Deangate. Esher recommended banishing traffic and unifying these places to create a paved pedestrian space flowing around the Minster. The traffic left in 1989, but little has changed since.

Now the Minster is to pave the area in front of the South Transept, and the moment should be seized to expand this scheme and create a pedestrian space from Museum Street to Goodramgate worthy of the Minster. Duncombe Place could be completely rethought as a part of this: its present form make little sense without large quantities of traffic.

The importance of the Minster and the number of its visitors suggest this should be a priority.

#### *2) Bridge the divide between the north and the south sides of the Minster.*

Locals know it and use it, but it is hidden by the cathedral from most visitors. By better information and signage and perhaps new facilities, ways could be considered to draw the Park into the orbit of more visitors to the Minster, to increase understanding and appreciation of the superb historic buildings and monuments around it.

Both these ideas will require close partnership with the Minster.






*Minster Yard is soon to become a paved square, but the tarmac will remain for the time being to the east of these gateposts*

Existing











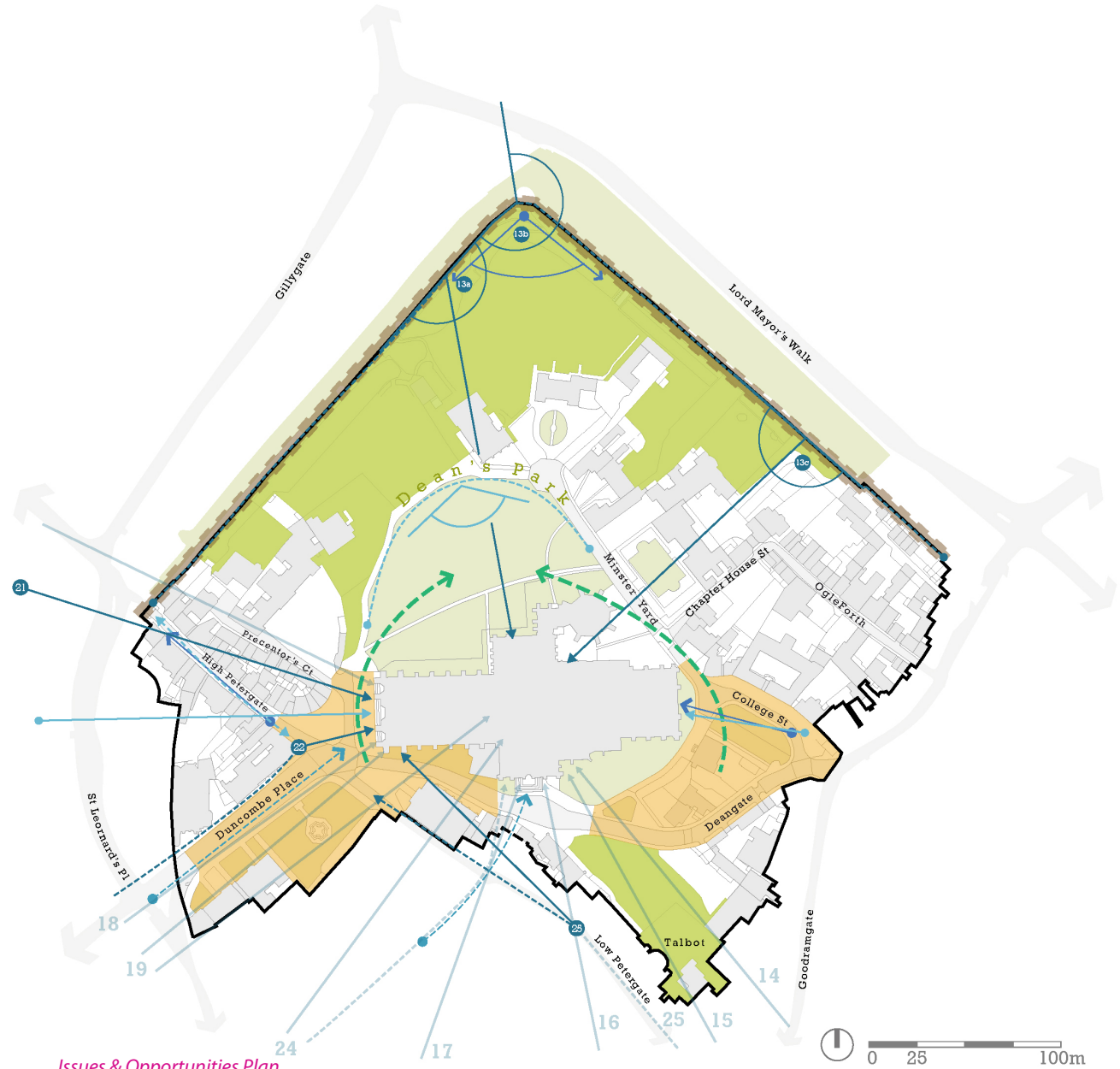
City Wall

Opportunities

-  Promote appreciation of Dean's Park and its buildings, monuments and history
-  Improvements to road and pavement surfaces to make consistent with other Footstreets
-  Well maintained gardens

Views

-  Strategic fixed with focal point
-  Strategic dynamic with focal point
-  Strategic dynamic panoramic
-  Strategic dynamic panoramic with focal point
-  Local fixed with focal point
-  Local dynamic
-  Local dynamic panoramic
-  Key view from outside the character area - refer to section 3.5



Issues & Opportunities Plan