

*The Town Halls
of Leicester*

THE TOWN HALLS OF LEICESTER

by

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The centenary of the opening of the present Town Hall provides an opportunity to consider the whole known history of Leicester's Town Halls through a span of over seven centuries.

Price: 60p.



The Guildhall



Court Yard, The Guildhall

The Early Town Halls

THE early history of the Town Halls of Leicester is obscure, possibly because the governing body of the Town (the Portmoot or Portmanmoot) was closely connected with the Guild Merchant, whose earliest meetings, or Morning Speeches, were probably held in the open in the churchyard of St. Nicholas.

Something is known of the house ("message") occupied by the Guild Merchant in the mid-thirteenth century. It was situated in the parish of St. Nicholas, then the business-centre of the town, and the annual rent paid by the Guild was 1s. 7d. This sum was paid to Isolda the Turner in 1257, Philip the Turner the following year, and to someone of the same name in 1260, 1261, 1262 and 1264. Philip the Turner is described as son of Philip the Turner in 1260. The fact that the message is often described as "belonging to the community" may mean the town rather than the Guild were responsible for it. The Guild Merchant was very poor and was not able to afford a lavish building, but after the purchase of a larger "hall," the old house was conveyed "with the unanimous consent of the community" to William Emery by Walter le Bron (Brown), Mayor of Leicester in 1275-6. The rent-charge due to the Turner family apparently continued, for, sixty years later in the Pleas of the Guild Merchant, there is a reference to Walter Brown, formerly Mayor of Leicester, who was stated to have conveyed away *veteram aulam Gylde* (the old Guild Hall), and that William le Turner claimed to have annually 1s. 6d. and two capons* "from the old Guildhall" (*de vetere Guildhall*).

The Guild Merchant had bought, in about 1251, a house from William Ordric, once owned by his father Stephen, son of Ivo, described as standing "at a certain corner between the land which was Richard the Parmenter's and Henry Shaune's land opposite the churchyard of St. Nicholas." Its actual position was opposite the east end of St. Nicholas' church in the lane, later known as Blue Boar Lane,† on the site where Simon's almshouse later stood. The house was conveyed to "the Mayor and Burgesses and Commune of Leicester and their successors," thus suggesting that by this date there was little difference, save in name, between the Guild Merchant and the Corporation leaders. The consideration, or purchase-sum, was 6½ marks (£4 6s. 8d.) of silver, and a yearly rent of 16 pence and two capons, "to wit, at Candlemas five pence, at Whitsuntide five pence, at Michaelmas six pence, at Christmas two capons." The annual services were later released, and on a payment of two marks (£1 6s. 8d.) the mother of William Ordric surrendered her right of dowry.

For some reason, the Guild did not immediately occupy their new hall, suggesting perhaps that it was in a dilapidated condition, and the Guild had insufficient means to pay for the necessary repairs. Seemingly, their old Hall was inadequate for their purposes; in 1258 the Morning Speeches were held in a house hired from Robert Griffin for one shilling.

Vandalism and theft from unoccupied buildings in need of repair was evidently no new problem in the thirteenth century, for Robert of the Dovecote was convicted in 1361 for taking freestones without licence from the hall of the Guild, and "carrying them to his own house to do with them what he liked to

* Castrated Cocks.

† Until Richard III spent his last night here before the Battle of Bosworth in 1485 the name of the hostelry and lane was "White Boar."

the damage and dishonour of the Guild and of the Community of Leicester." A fine of one shilling does not appear to have been a deterrent. Thirty years later, a person of the same name was accused of selling stones, illegally taken from the town wall, with a canon of Leicester Abbey confessing that he had knowingly bought the stolen stones!

Although no recorded meeting in the new Hall took place until March, 1276, the repair, or possibly re-building of that Hall took place in 1274, with work costing four pounds carried out between Candlemas (February 2nd) and July. Alexander le Debonair, Mayor of Leicester, 1270-73, "rendered an account of the Guild-hall of £6 9s. 3d. in the presence of the Community" on St. Cuthbert's Day, 1274. The total known expenditure for the new Hall appears to have totalled £12 2s. 7d. In addition to the building account and the amount of £1 6s. 8d. for the surrendered right of dowry just mentioned, it will be recalled that the purchase price for the building was £4 6s. 8d.

The site has been described as being twenty yards and one foot in length, nine yards in breadth at the east and seven at the west. Whether these measurements were confined to the building itself is not clear; if they were, this Hall was as large as the later Corpus Christi Guildhall.

The Blue Boar Lane building did possess a small mud-walled garden and this may have been included in the measurements. The cost of labour and materials for the building of the wall amounted to 3s. 11d. made up of wages of 2s. 7d. (two wall-builders were paid 1s. 7d. for 3½ days and two more received in total 1s. for 1½ days' work). Straw and water cost 1s. 4d. The building had a gabled roof, covered with two and a half thousand Swithland slates; in addition to the main Hall, there was also a porch and a large upper chamber, known as the solar, which overhung the street (Mayor's Hall Lane). This allowed for the provision of four shops, or market booths, let out at a rental of four shillings annually from 1309-1346. Both the hall, known initially as the "Moot Hall" but Town or Mayor's Hall in the next century, and the upper Chamber had wooden benches, covered with mats on special occasions, when the floors would also be strewn with grass or rushes. Riotous or drunken behaviour seems to have caused havoc with the contents on more than one occasion, but the best recorded instance occurs in the Borough Accounts for 1334 when reference was made to repairs to the benches "broken and thrown down in the presence of the King's Justice then sitting to hold the Assize." At this particular date courts were normally held at the Castle, and the reason for the change is unknown.

A "Keeper of the Guild Hall" was appointed in 1306, at a time when the roof was giving trouble. He contracted with a slater for 5s. 11d. "and two boys helping him 4s. 1½d." the total cost, including some new benches, being 19s. 2¾d. More extensive repairs were necessary in 1314 when a thousand slates on the roof were replaced; a further thousand were needed only six years later. All this repair work appeared of little use. A more extensive restoration was necessary in 1326 and this cost £2 18s. 4½d.,* involving re-timbering, re-plastering and a completely new roof of 2,500 slates. Even this work was only sufficient for a life of forty years. By 1366, timber had been bought to prop the building up and re-building was thought necessary. The steep pitch of the roof seems to have caused special problems for re-slating was again carried out and the hall was largely re-built at a total cost of £24 14s. William of Syston and John of Scruptoft are described as "Keepers of the work of the common hall of the town" and appear to have supervised the building work, perhaps receiving special instructions not to tolerate shoddy

* The main items of expenditure were lime (31 quarters) 11s. 7½d., roofing 10s. 6d (and 4s. for slates), sand (38 cart loads) 4s. 9d., stones (28 cart loads) 3s. 8d., cart hire (3 days) 3s. Wages 9s. 4d. (2 masons for 9 days' work 6s.; their 2 servants 3s. 4d.).

workmanship, which had caused the Corporation so much expense on the building for a long time past. Some of the old slates were used in roofing the little chapel on West Bridge.

One of the relics brought from the older "hall" was the summoning bell used at the start of meetings for calling the community together. This had been purchased for 6*d.* in 1220, and had been mended for 3*d.* in 1258. A new mace was bought for 13*s.* 6*d.* in 1378. A locked chest, or "common coffer" was originally the property of the Guild, but was later used to preserve the deeds and records of the Corporation; other muniments appear to have been kept in sacks and hampers. Weights and measures were also kept at the Guildhall as well as the Corporation seals, which were kept in a purse with four keys. The town's armoury, such as it was, was also stored and repaired at the Hall. From late Saxon times, the town was compelled to send and equip twelve burgesses to fight by land with the King's Army. The number was reduced to six in 1346.

In 1521, the town kept ten able archers in harness with bows and arrows, swords and bucklets, "with other able harness for their bodies" to be ready for the King's use at a day's notice. The plate and property, handed down from mayor to mayor, was the subject of regular inventories, such as that made in 1551 when there were "in the towne hall to the townes use these parcelles following"—

"Itm. xx'(20) alman revyttes (i.e. corslets rivetted in the German fashion) with splentes, sallytes and gorgetes.

"Itm. xix'(19) Shef of arrowys with caces and gyrdelles.

"Itm. on byll, tow bowys, viii'(8) swordes, three daggers.

Before the fifteenth century was over, the hall had become inadequate for Borough meetings and the Corpus Christi Guildhall was used, although it is not until the winter of 1494-5 that recorded mention of a Common Hall held there occurs*. Thereafter the Hall in Blue Boar Lane, which had previously been known variously as "Leicester Hall," "Guild Hall," "Moot Hall," "Mayor's Hall," "the Hall of the Community," or the "Common Hall," was referred to as "the old Hall," "the old Mayor's Hall," or even "the olde shoppe." The old building was nonetheless still used for some Corporation meetings and repairs were still carried out at the Borough's expense. Indeed, the building was re-decorated in 1549-50 with "antick work," scriptures and the King's arms. The garden was leased for thirty years from 1537 at a rent of 23 pence and the mayor's clerk had had a lease of a house adjoining "Town Hall" from 1452—the first time that term was applied to the building. Even after the purchase of the Corpus Christi Guildhall in 1562-63, the Corporation continued to keep the old building in repair, although one door and the armoury was removed to the new Hall. The Blue Boar Lane Hall found many uses, as a temporary school, a reception-centre for prisoners, and a coal store. A stone wall was built in 1573 to divide the coal house from the prisoners, but a resolution in 1580 that "no member of the Forty-eight to be punished any longer at the Old Hall but at the new," suggests that refractory Councillors received privileged treatment and were not to be mixed with the common prisoners.

The end of the Hall is something of a mystery. During the siege of Leicester in 1645, as tradition tells, the building was used as a powder and cannon-ball store, and was blown up by the King's forces. There is another story that it was sold to John Kestian, maltster, for £30 in 1653, yet "The Mayor's Old Hall" still appears in the Borough rental roll in 1694!

* See following section "The Guildhall."

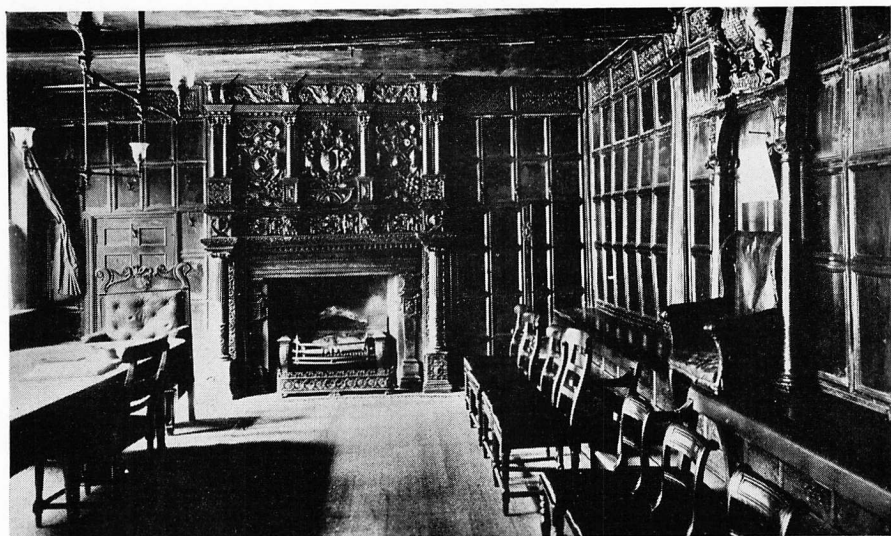
The Guildhall

THE close connection between the Guild of Corpus Christi and the Corporation may have meant that the building we know as the Guildhall today was built with the possibility in mind that the hall could be used by the Town as well as for Guild meetings. Although the Guild, whose finances were more substantial than those of the Borough, was founded in 1343, it is thought that the three eastern bays of the Guildhall were not built until after 1380. The two western bays were not added until around 1450, before the time when the Corporation are known to have first met officially in the building. The 19th Century Leicester antiquary, Thomas North, mentions an ordinance in 1477 passed by the Mayor and his Brethren, which clearly showed that "the two masters of the Guild were at that time closely connected with the Corporation in the Government of the town, and to some extent were invested by the Mayor and his Brethren with superior authority, inasmuch as they had power to inflict penalties on the Mayor himself in case he neglected his duty."

The second "hall" or parlour was erected in 1489, the same year as the Corporation body had been extended to include the Forty-Eight (elected councillors) in addition to the older body, known as the Twenty-Four (aldermen). The earliest mention of a Common Hall (Council Meeting) occurs on January 8th, 1494-95, when it appears the Corporation were allowed use of the Guildhall rent free, although charcoal was paid for by the Town Chamberlains.

The upper room at the east end of the building was traditionally the living quarters of the Chantry Priests, but became one of the earliest English town libraries in the seventeenth century. The chantry was dissolved at Easter, 1548, and the property of the Corpus Christi guild was vested in the Crown. Nonetheless the Borough continued to use the Guildhall referred to as "The Hall," the "New Hall," Corpus Christi Hall, or Town Hall and both this hall and the older hall were repaired at the town's expense. A study for the mayor was set up in 1556-7; nine pieces of old wood and 44 lbs. of lead brought from "the church" being among the materials used. The cost was £7 16s. 0½d., to which the mayor contributed 10s. The Corporation were anxious to obtain the freehold of the Hall, and enlisted the help of Robert Brahaun, M.P., Recorder of Leicester, 1558-1575. He was instrumental in negotiating with Mrs. Cecilia Pickerell, widow of Norwich, who had the Corpus Christi Hall amongst her considerable property in many counties. The negotiations were conducted through her proxy Edmund Brudenell, possibly of Stonton Wyville in Leicestershire. "They dedis and Raylausse of the towne hall bought by Mr. Brougham Recorder in the tyme of Mr. Reynold mayre Anno 1563" provided a satisfactory conclusion to matters and probably all property west of St. Martin's churchyard was included in the sale.

The Chamberlain's accounts for 1562-3 refer to wine drunk at the "possession-taking of the Hall." A certain sum (£18) was paid to Mr. Manby, one of the attorneys mentioned in the conveyance, representing the amount he had laid out for the purchase of the Hall, and an amount of £2 13s. 4d. was paid to "Mr. Recorder that he laid out and for his pains." It was another two or three years before the apparent outlay of £25 15s. 4d. was finally cleared. The accounts for 1565-6 show a further payment of £7 9s. 4d. to Manby and "arrearages of Hall" £5 10s. 8d. Obviously the Corporation had had difficulty in raising the money, at a time when Leicester's economy was in a bad shape and poverty was rife.



Mayor's Parlour, Old Town Hall, Leicester (c. 1920)

The Corporation title to the property was confirmed in the well known Charter of Elizabeth I in 1589. The buildings comprised four sides of a square with an open courtyard in the centre. On the north side facing the street stood the Guildhall, 62 feet long, 19 to 20 feet wide and 27 feet high. The Parlour, originally open to the roof, was on the west, and the armoury, larder and kitchens on the south. On the east were the former residences of the four chantry priests as previously mentioned.

It is interesting to note that, by a Corporation prohibition in 1572, the mayor was not allowed to lend the hall for meetings of the Paratours or cloth-makers. The reason behind this prohibition is not clear but presumably the mayor could only let outsiders use the hall with the consent of the Council.

A bedroom was fitted up for the Recorder above the eastern end of the hall in 1582. The Recorder, Richard Parkins, "applied himself to reading and digesting the records of the town." The furniture concerned was stated to remain to the use of the town and that this is to be annually recorded in the accounts "for the better remembrance thereof." The items mentioned in the 1581-2 and 1582-3 accounts included:

"a trusse beddstead, a trundle bedde and a cupboard sett in the chambre at the hall there to remeyne for the use of Mr. Recorder	26s. 8d.
"three mattes for the Recorder's chamber	22d.
"for russhes for the same	
"a trundle bedd readie corded for the Recorder's chamber }	4s. 8d.
"a feyther bedd ticke for the bedd in the Recorder's chamber at the hall	14s. 6d.
"two bowlstres	6s. 0d.
"one pillowe	2s. 8d.
"for fyve stonne and 1 pounce of feythers for the same at 5s. 4d. a stonne	26s. 9d.
"16 elves of silcke wooll for a coveredd for the bedd at 1s. 6d. the elve	24s. 0d.
"one wooll matriss	8s. 0d.
One other matriss therefore	5s. 0d.
"a coveredd for his man's bedd	(no amount shown)

Due to depleted Corporation finances, it was found necessary to mortgage the Hall in 1584 in order to secure a loan guaranteed on behalf of the

Corporation by two of its members, the Mayor, Robert Herrick, and the wealthy landlord of the Blue Boar Inn, Thomas Clarke. They bound themselves in a bond of £200 to Agnes Stringer for the payment of £100. She may have been the widow of Alderman Roger Stringer. The rest of the Twenty-Four promised 1s. 2d. each and the Forty-Eight 7d. each.

A Mace-Stand was made in 1586, the date appearing between the letters E.R. and John Carver was paid 15s. "for carving and making the Queen's Arms" and for gilding 26s. 8d. The Town library was transferred from St. Martin's church to the old Chantry room in 1632, the cost of re-fitting being £10 15s. 3d.

The Mayor's Parlour, which had had two upper floors inserted above it in 1563, although the original windows were preserved, was re-built or restored in 1636, at enormous cost. "This year the Parlour belonging to the Guildhall with the chamber gallery evidence house and other rooms adjoining unto the same were newly erected at the charge of the Common Chamber, £224 14s. 3d." The highlights were the oak panelling and the carved chimney piece, costing £23, involved amounts of £15 16s. 6d. to carver, £4 13s. 6d. to joiner and woodseller, and £2 10s. for colouring and gilding among its cost. It was re-decorated in near-original colours in 1954. The Mayor's chair was given in 1637 by the then Mayor, Richard Inge. The Royal Arms above it are slightly later, those of Charles I, carved in oak. The windows contain fragments of stained and painted glass and probably date from the original c.1490 era. One indeed may refer to the Investiture of Arthur as Prince of Wales in 1489. The Jury Room above the Parlour is now the office and library of the Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society.

The old cells at the east end of the courtyard and the former house of the Chief Constable are a reminder that the newly-established Police Force had its headquarters here from 1836 until the new Town Hall was brought into use.

The Guildhall, which has been open to the public now for fifty years, was under threat of demolition for many years, prior to its restoration, which was directed by the Leicester architect, T. H. Fosbrooke, from 1922-25. At one time previously the Guildhall had served such an unsuitable purpose as that of a cookery school.

Throughout the Elizabethan era the Guildhall was used for many social functions, and as a playhouse for the innumerable companies of strolling players who were normally required to have the mayor's permission to play before they could perform. The known actors who performed included Edward Alleyn and Richard Burbage (Richard III); there is, however, no evidence that Shakespeare was ever seen in person in the Guildhall. The Borough records recall as many as fifty-six companies visiting Leicester in the 16th century, but in 1585-6 the Earl of Essex's players received 20s. because "they were not suffered to play at the Hall," which was then undergoing structural alterations. Throughout the same century the Corporation had to endure the unwelcome intrusion of the saltpetre man, who dug up the hall floor on several occasions. During the hot summer of 1611, the windows were taken out of the hall, possibly as a precaution against plague, which was then raging in Leicester.

The annual mayoral feast was a regular highlight, but the greatest of all civic banquets held in the Guildhall was possibly the Armada feast, held in 1588. Two long tables, first and second, extended down the length of the hall, and a similar arrangement existed in the Parlour; another table was also in use upstairs.

The New Town Hall or “Municipal” Hall

THE population of Leicester increased from around 3,000 when the Guildhall was built to over 60,000 in 1851, although at the start of the nineteenth century the figure was under 20,000. Obviously the size of the Guildhall was too small to serve a town whose population was rising so rapidly. The building was described as “inadequate” as early as 1814, and plans for a new one were drawn up by the Leicester architect, William Firmadage (1755-1836), whose bill dated 1st May, 1820, was £122 10s. Yet nothing was done for half-a-century.

The next time the question of a new Town Hall was raised was in 1845 when John Biggs and his brother William, heading a party of “Improvers,” met with opposition from the rival “Economists,” who, with a fine lack of foresight, thought the idea of a new Corporation building was a needless expense and won the argument of the day, “on the grounds that any such development would be unnecessary extravagance.”* It was not until the 1860s that the question again raised its head, and met with wider acceptance, though the proper site and physical form was now the difficulty, and no agreement was reached. The events of this time, later described by John Storey, who was Town Clerk at the time, are admirably summed up in these words: “The question of providing a Pile of Buildings on some central site, with Courts of Justice and rooms for the transaction of all Municipal business was for many years before the Council.” There was much difference of opinion and fierce debate and no decisive steps were taken until December 1870. Two sites received equal support, the old Cattle Market in Horsefair Street, and a site of some Friar Lane property, purchased by the Corporation from Beaumont Burnaby in 1866. Ultimately two resolutions of Council were passed—

- (1) On 20th December, 1870, that Municipal Buildings were absolutely required for the convenient transaction of public business.
- (2) On 17th January, 1871, that Municipal Buildings (not to include a large hall) should be erected on the Friar Lane property. A committee was appointed and prizes of £200, £100 and £50 were agreed for the three best competitive designs. The sum to be expended on the buildings, exclusive of the furniture, should not exceed £25,000.

Mr. Street was appointed on 6th June, 1871, to report upon the designs submitted and to select five which the Council would consider and from which they would choose three. The first prize was awarded to Barnard and Smith (*Speramus*), the second to Goddard and Spiers (*Fiat Justicia*) and third to Innocent and Brown of Sheffield (*Eugt*). The Committee considered the plans and then made a shock announcement inviting the prize winning firms to reconsider their designs “with reference to Mr. Street’s objections and the Committee’s suggestions.” Barnard and Smith were not willing to do this and the Committee then chose the second design, which they recommended the Council to accept on 26th October, 1871. However, certain members of the Council, advocates of the alternate site, challenged the Committee’s over-zealous exercise of discretion. The motion to adopt their report consequently

* One wonders what this party would think of the purchase, in the face of overwhelming opposition from ratepayers, of the new Civic Centre in 1975!

contained an amendment stating that the Committee had exceeded their powers by requiring the three prize winners to enter into a further competition and that the whole question should be referred to a Committee of the whole Council. The amendment was carried decisively by 31 to 21 votes.

The Sub-Committee members who had conferred with the architects were Messrs. Burgess, Toller and Stevenson and all resigned their aldermanic seats, believing that the decision cast a slur on their reputation. The matter was patched up when they were unanimously re-elected to the offices they had vacated at the Council Meeting of 9th November, 1871. Explanations were given by the mover and seconder and others of the original resolution. It was as though council members had had second thoughts and now wished to quickly and quietly play down the whole affair, perhaps knowing that, not for the first time the scheme was conveniently shelved and the "Friar Lane furore" died down. The resolution adopting the Friar Lane Site was not officially rescinded until September, 1872, when attention was directed to the old Cattle Market site, which had been cleared six months previously. The space was to be reserved as the site for a large hall "to be erected at some future time." There was still criticism, but it was muted in character. The accepted practice of the day was still an open competition for designs and the advertisement notices stated that the cost of the buildings was not to exceed £30,000 with the premiums being the same as in the previous competition. This time Thomas Henry Wyatt, President of the R.I.B.A., reported on ten sets of plans. The Council, on 22nd July, 1873, awarded first prize to F. J. Hames, a young architect practising in London, but a member of a Leicester family and a pupil of William Millican. Ordish and Traylen of Leicester were second and third place went to Gilbert Scott of London. All except the winning design were Classical or Gothic in style. It had been held that Hames was influenced by the Hotel de Ville in Paris. Comment in *The Builder* (Vol XXXI, p. 477-8, 1873) was scarcely tolerant of Hames' design:

"We should scarcely wish to see so important a building erected in this style. It may be urged that it harmonizes with the character of the Leicester streets; but that, perhaps, should be a reason against rather than for it; for the town sadly wants enlivening with regard to its architecture, and if this design were carried out, something should, at all events, be done by a more striking treatment of the angles to take away a little of the workhouse look which from some points it would inevitably present."

Nationally then, the new Town Hall was the first large civic building to be erected in the Queen Anne style, a revolutionary choice in its day, but one that has weathered the passing of a century with success. Previously most public buildings in the 1860s and 70s were in the Classical or Gothic style. Hames revised his plans in conference with a Committee, and was appointed architect for the work and on 15th December, 1873, a contract was signed with Flude and White for executing the earthwork for the foundations (£429) and three months later, the main contract was given to Bass of London on 3rd March, 1874, for the erection of the buildings. The figure of £31,935 included £650 for the extra cost of the external Ketton stone. Further items during work-in-progress were agreed by the Council as follows:

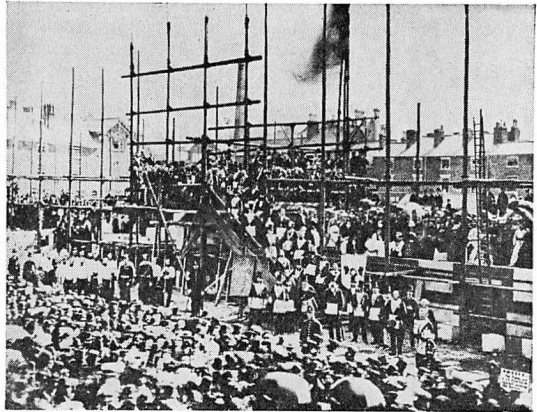
Formation of a Club Room in Roof £230
Extra Finishings £148
Portland Cement in Public Hall and Ground Floor Corridors £313
Accommodation for Fire Brigade and Lamp Lighters £600
Enlargement of Tower £1,785.

All these additional items provided ample evidence that the cost of the building was rising dramatically above the £30,000 figure envisaged in 1872. The clock seems to have been almost an afterthought—it was not until 28th

September, 1875, that the tender (£907) from E. T. Loseby (1817-1891)* of Leicester was accepted. That contract was never completed for Loseby the perfectionist died in June, 1891, having belatedly inserted the present quarter chiming clock made in Derby as an intended temporary substitute, and even that not until three years after the rest of the building had been completed. The persistent absence of a clock became an accepted joke in the Leicester theatres and music-halls of the day! Loseby himself paid for it plus installation charges.

The entire work was completed in just two years, but would not have taken so long had there not been both strikes and bad weather. Added difficulties were caused by the resignation of the first Clerk of Works (wages £2 10s. per week) before even the foundation stone had been laid. The next Clerk of Works asked for £3 3s. wages a week.

The foundation stone was laid by Ald. William Kempson, Mayor, on 3rd August, 1874—one of the first August Bank Holiday Mondays, and a procession assembled at the old Guildhall, consisting of magistrates, Council members, mayors of neighbouring towns, school board members, etc. This procession then moved to the site and a dinner was later held at the Corn Exchange.



Laying of the Foundation Stone, 1874

Just two years later, again on Bank Holiday Monday, the Hall was opened on 7th August, 1876, by Ald. William Barfoot, Mayor. The procession from the old to new halls was regarded as the largest that had ever been witnessed in Leicester. The Mayor was presented with a silver key, a short address and prayer were spoken, and there were speeches to the crowd in the square. A Council Meeting was then held, followed by a dinner at the Corn Exchange. There was an evening firework display and a Mayor's Ball in the Assembly Rooms (later County Rooms). The full description of the day's events is well summarised by Storey, and the following extracts are taken without alteration, from his *Historical Sketch of the Borough* (pp. 68-69-70):

"The Council, before proceeding to open the New Buildings, held a farewell meeting in their Chamber at the Old Guildhall, at which the following Resolution was passed:—

"That having for between three and four centuries conducted the Public affairs of this ancient Borough in this Guildhall, the Municipal Council finds that the growth and prosperity of Leicester demand better accommodation for the transaction of the business of the Town, and before bidding a final adieu to this time-honoured building, and taking possession of the new Council Chamber and Offices in Horsefair Street, it wishes to place upon record its thankfulness for the prosperity which has for many years past been experienced by the inhabitants of Leicester, and for the public spirit which, amidst the various changes of party, has so animated the men who have governed the Borough as to have resulted in the acquisition of such rights and blessings of Local Government as must conduce to political freedom and social order.

* Loseby, the son of a Hotel Street watchmaker, worked in London for some years and became well known for his chronometers used on Polar expeditions; one varied only three hundredths of a second in 18 months. His patented movement for the Corn Exchange clock (1858) may be seen in the Newarke Houses Museum, Leicester.

"The Council honours the memory and sacrifices of all who have striven in this Hall, under whatever party-name, for the maintenance and extension of Municipal Institutions. It does not forget that within these old and now historic walls, England's greatest writer may have spoken and impersonated some of the undying creations of his genius, and there is unquestioned proof that here, during the period full of peril to our Town and its liberties, patriotism was inspired to some of its noblest struggles.

"In closing its proceedings in this Chamber, the Council earnestly hopes that it may carry to the New Hall that honourable zeal for the Public service which it believes has filled the breasts of those who have enjoyed the distinction of a seat in this Chamber, and when future Centuries shall have rolled away, it trusts that the glory of the New Hall may exceed that of the Old."

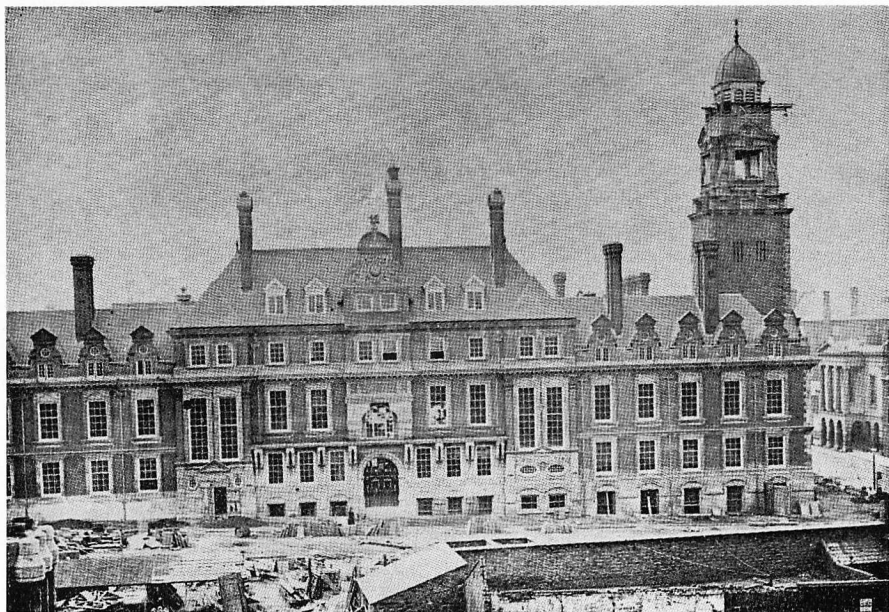
"The procession, which was formed at the Old Town Hall, consisting of almost every public body in the town, and in which the various Friendly Societies joined, was unquestionably the largest that had ever then been witnessed in Leicester.

"On the Mayor arriving at the new buildings he was presented with a silver key by Ald. Burgess, the Chairman of the Buildings' Committee, and after a special prayer had been offered by the Venerable Archdeacon Fearon in the Crown Court, his Worship delivered an address, and declared the Buildings open for the public purposes of the Borough. The Right Honourable Lord John Manners (then Duke of Rutland), Mr. Justice Mellor, and others, addressed those present in the Court, and speeches were subsequently made from the balcony to the remainder of the processionists, and thousands of others who had assembled in the Town Hall Square. A Council meeting was then held in the New Chamber, after which the Mayor entertained the Magistrates, Council, and a large number of other guests, amongst whom were Lord John Manners, Mr. Justice Mellor, Sir Frederick Fowke, Sir Archdale Palmer, Sir Henry Halford, Sir A. B. C. Dixie, Mr. Pell, M.P., Mr. Clowes, M.P., Mr. Heygate, M.P., Mr. Mearthur, M.P., and the Mayors of the neighbouring towns, at a Banquet, in the Corn Exchange. There was a grand display of Fireworks on the Victoria Park, in the evening, and the festivities closed with a Mayor's Ball in the Assembly Rooms."

"The total cost is shewn by the following Statement, which is an extract from a report presented by the Buildings' Committee, to the Council, on the 31st July, 1877:—

	£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.
Original Contract	31,285	0	0			
Additions thereto ordered by the Committee	7,198	0	4			
	<hr/>			38,483	0	4
Fittings	6,233	0	0			
Gas pipes and lamps, heating and water expenses	1,985	13	2			
Paid on account clock and bells	450	0	0			
Furniture, etc.	1,969	9	2			
	<hr/>			10,638	2	4
				49,121	2	8
Estimated to pay for clock ...				550	0	0
Architect				2,850	0	0
Paid Clerk of Works ...				390	0	0
				<hr/>		
Total cost of the whole				£52,911	2	8

"At the commencement of the works the borrowing powers of the Council for the purposes of public buildings, under the provisions of "The Leicester Cattle Market, Town Hall, and Improvement Act, 1866" was about £32,000; the "Leicester Improvement Act, 1876," authorised the borrowing of a further sum of £15,000, and the balance was defrayed from the then current and succeeding year's rates."



Town Hall under construction, 1874-6

There had been much discussion as to what the new block should be called, but before the official opening a Council resolution, dated 30th March, 1876, had stated: —

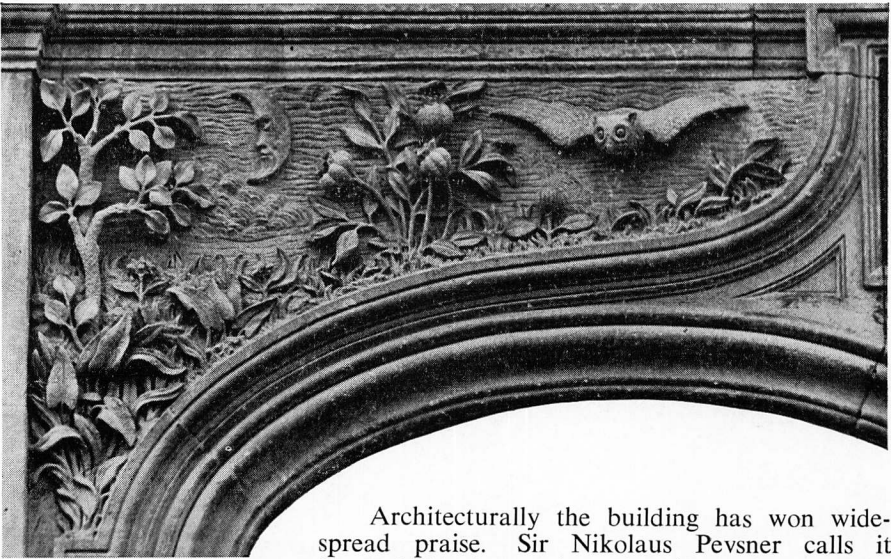
“That in the opinion of the Council it is desirable that the Public Buildings now in course of erection on part of the site of the Old Cattle Market, fronting to a new street leading from Horsefair Street to Bishop Street, and abutting on the last mentioned streets and Bowling Green Street, and now usually called Municipal Buildings, should from the opening thereof be and be designated ‘The Town Hall,’ and it is hereby ordered and directed that from such opening the buildings in question shall be and form the Town Hall of the Borough of Leicester, and shall be distinguished by the title of ‘The Town Hall’.”

With the grant of city status to Leicester by King George V perhaps the Town Hall should then have been re-christened “City Hall,” but this does not seem to have been considered at the time.

In recent years the Town Hall has housed the Council Chamber,* Committee Rooms, Lord Mayor’s Parlour, Law Courts, the offices of the City Attorney† (formerly Town Clerk) and City Treasurer. With centralised offices in the new controversial Civic Centre, some changes will take place shortly. Originally the building provided Police and Fire Brigade accommodation, but as early as 1897 the building was regarded as inadequate for the various purposes it was required. When the Fire Brigade moved to its old headquarters in Rutland Street the Medical Officer of Health moved into its offices, along with the Inspectors of Nuisances (the fore-runners of the Sanitary and Health Inspectors). The Head Constable was no longer to have a residence and rooms were also given to the Rate Clerk and Collectors at the corner of Bishop Street and Bowling Green Street, with an additional room made available for the School Board.

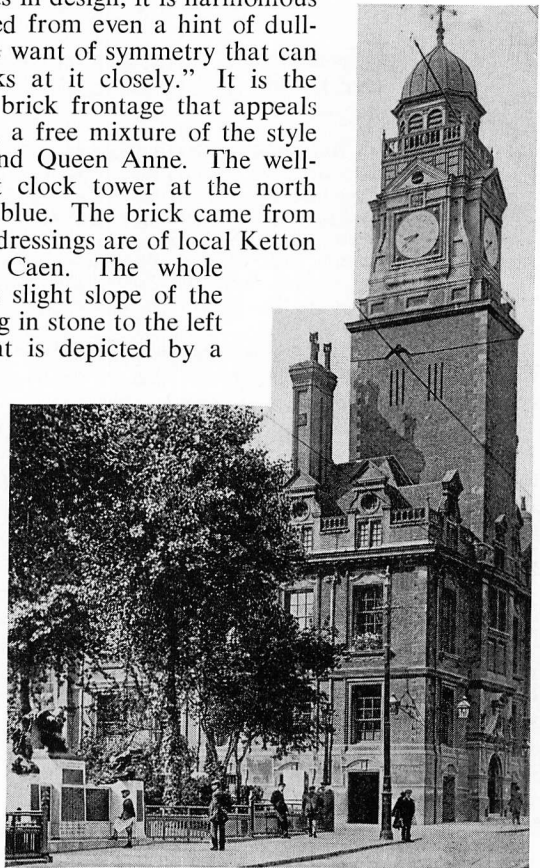
* Refurbished in the 1930s but the chamber was often the subject of complaint on the grounds of inaudibility and lack of air!

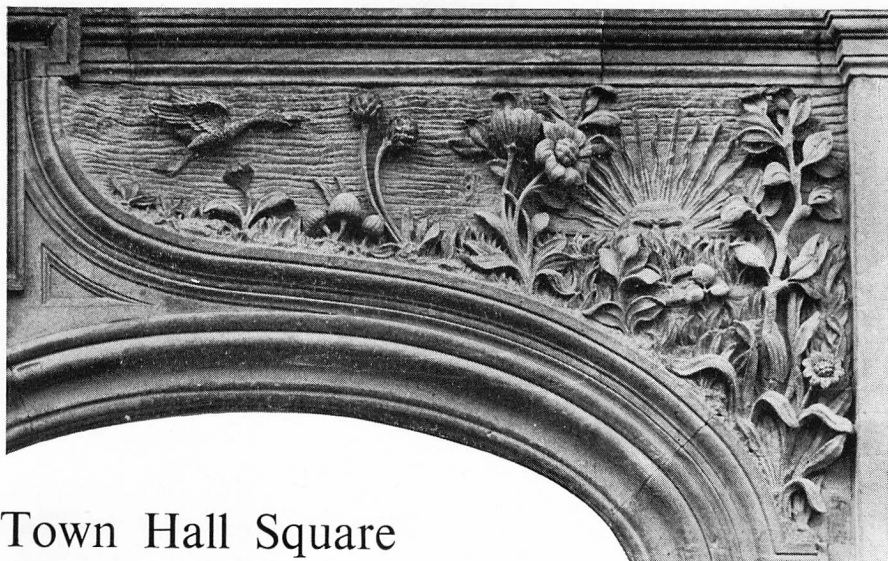
† Now temporarily moved to 30 New Walk, Leicester.



Architecturally the building has won widespread praise. Sir Nikolaus Pevsner calls it "remarkably free and comfortable-looking" whilst Professor J. Simmons has called it "a distinguished building" and "a piece of Victorian architecture of which the city has a right to be proud." "In materials as well as in design, it is harmonious and graceful and it is redeemed from even a hint of dullness by a deliberate and subtle want of symmetry that can be seen by anyone who looks at it closely." It is the impressive 220 foot dark red brick frontage that appeals most to the man in the street, a free mixture of the style of the Flemish Renaissance and Queen Anne. The well-proportioned oblong 134 foot clock tower at the north end has the brick diapered in blue. The brick came from Suffolk and the external stone dressings are of local Ketton Stone; interior stonework is Caen. The whole frontal effect is helped by the slight slope of the ground. Notice also the carving in stone to the left of the foundation stone; night is depicted by a crescent moon with face, an owl and sleep-inducing poppy seeds, whilst day is illustrated nearby with a rising sun, a duck in early morning flight, sunflowers, clover and mushrooms, all fresh in the early morning. The side wings to the front of the building and the Bowling Green Street frontage were both built in 1932.

Town Hall
and War Memorial
(c. 1914)





Town Hall Square

The layout of the square, costing about £1,200, and directed by Hames, was not wholly satisfactory, never having the air of spaciousness necessary to show off the Town Hall to fullest advantage.

The generous gift of a fountain by another Leicester Mayor, Sir Israel Hart (1835-1911), was made on 29th October, 1878. The design, by Hames, was of four winged assyrian lions in bronzed cast iron and was based on one in Oporto, Portugal. The cost (about £2,000) was known only to Hart, but the gift was not accepted without controversy. The Chairman of the Waterworks Committee was concerned with water wastage and wished Hart's generosity had been in some other form. Ald. George Stevenson stated "they should not judge everything by its actual cost and that such public ornaments



Municipal Buildings and Town Hall Square (c. 1910)

as the fountain would do much to elevate the tastes of the people of Leicester." 5,000 or 6,000 gallons of water was the estimated hourly usage, but the water was later re-circulated.

It took eight months to complete the project and the fountain was unveiled on 24th September, 1879, by which date Hart was High Bailiff, as the inscription states. The newspaper report of the event reads as follows:

"The fountain is erected in a basin 30 feet in diameter and 2 feet 6 inches deep formed of massive blocks of shap granite 14 feet in length and lined with white glazed brick. Total height 25 feet 6 inches. Three different ways of working the fountain exist, the water can come out of the lions' mouths, out of the jugs in the central basin or from five jets in the upper basin."

The fountain was unveiled at 1 o'clock on a wet Wednesday by Mr. Hart. At the conclusion of the ceremony there was a luncheon at the Corn Exchange at 2 o'clock.

A Boer War memorial to local men who fell may still be seen on the North-East side of the Square fronting Horsefair Street.

During World War II, the Town Hall Square made a contribution to the war effort when it was used as allotments. More recently, the Square has been opened out and the annual highlight is the switching on of the Christmas illuminations.

The buildings surrounding the Square constitute a Conservation area. Fierce, even bitter, controversy raged for more than five years over the future of the Sun-Alliance Insurance building, happily resolved in 1975 with the preservation of the facade. A less agreeable event in that year was the re-naming of Every Street,* the road to the East of the Square, as Municipal Square East. Is Town Hall Square now to be known as Municipal Square?



The Fountain, Town Hall Square

* The name is said to have originated from the nineteenth century cab drivers who had a stand there and who boasted that "fares" would be taken to every part of the town.

ILLUSTRATIONS

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