

Witney Corn Exchange



1863 -2015 A Brief History

By

Witney Town Council



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WHAT CAME BEFORE



WITNEY CORN RETURNS OFFICE

The story of the Corn Exchange begins with the previous building that was on the site of where it was built. The Corn Returns Office was a Tudor-built, timber-framed building – when demolition was taking place in 1862 a brick was found bearing the date 1593. Prior to being the Corn Returns Office, the building was possibly a public house and before that a private residence which historians believe was likely to be owned and lived in by one of the wealthy Witney merchant families.

For nearly a hundred years, from 1771-1864, the official Corn Returns for individual market towns were published weekly in the London Gazette and were intended to account for the sales of British grain, ascertain wheat production, show the state of the harvests and set agricultural prices. Records show that Wheat and Barley were produced in the largest numbers for Witney returns with wheat achieving the highest price.

Witney in the middle of the 19th Century was a prosperous town and many other market towns across the country had

built purpose built Corn Exchanges in the 1850's. The leading people of the town wanted a grander place to buy and sell corn as it had previously been carried out underneath the Town Hall at least from 1750 but probably a lot earlier on Thursdays.



A picture exists of this building, drawn by a Witney Surveyor, William Seely in the 1850's.

WITNEY CORN EXCHANGE



AND PUBLIC ROOMS COMPANY LTD

The Company was created in 1862 after a committee was formed in order to provide a new Corn Exchange in Witney with prominent town residents including members of the Early and Clinch family being Directors. The money, some £2,500 (approximately £110,000 in today's money) was raised by subscription with the hope that subscribers would get a returned dividend each year from the profits. They decided that the Exchange would have a dual purpose of housing the Corn buying and selling and having a public space where groups could gather. The architect employed was Mr. John Collier of Putney and the architect was Mr. Malachi Bartlett who was one of Witney's most prominent builders.

At a meeting, held on 4th June 1863, the Committee resolved to have 'plate glass' in the building and placed a newspaper advertisement in May inviting tenders for the rooms

**Witney Corn Exchange and Public Rooms
Company (Limited.)**

THE Directors are now ready to receive Tenders for the Leasing of any or either of the Front Rooms.

Tenders (which must specify the purpose for which the Rooms are to be applied, as well as the Rent offered), to be addressed to the Secretary, post-paid, before the 29th instant. The Directors do not pledge themselves to accept the highest or any Tender.

Any further particulars may be obtained on application to
N. GRAHAM RAVENOR, Secretary.

High-street, Witney, May 14, 1863.

The tenders from Witney Athenaeum and the Natural History Society, for one room each, at the yearly rental of 25s each were accepted by the Committee. Messrs. Clinch and Sons sent in a tender for the whole of the building, but it was not accepted, the Committee preferring to have control of the edifice themselves.

The Corn Exchange was built in the 'Italianate manner' and contained a principal ground-floor dealing room, measuring 70ft by 35ft, a reading room 21ft by 15ft, and a lecture and museum room 39ft by 21ft together with two smaller offices.

The Corn Exchange officially opened on 17th September 1863 during Witney Feast week.

This advertisement was taken in Jackson's Oxford Journal on 22 August 1863 to advise that the Exchange would be opening and showing the prices and subscriptions for admission...

THE WITNEY CORN EXCHANGE will be
OPENED for Market purposes on Thursday the 17th
day of September, 1863. Market hours from Two till Four
o'clock. Stands, £1 1s. per annum. Admission—per day,
2d. ; per annum, 5s. The Stands will be allotted according
to the order of application. Tickets, for the Stands and
annual admission, may be had of the Secretary, Mr. N.
Graham Ravenor, High-street, Witney, to whom application
for the remaining Shares should be addressed.
Witney, 17th August, 1863.

The first large meeting held at the new building was the annual meeting of the 'British and Foreign Bible Society' on 25th September 1863. The Oxford Journal reported that it was held in the Upper Room, holding upwards of 200 persons and that several of the speakers alluded to the beauty and convenience of the room, and congratulated the meeting and the town generally on now possessing such increased accommodation for public meetings.

The Witney Athenaeum, which was a society for the local gentlemen of the town in pursuit of knowledge and learning was another society that held lectures and series of readings there, when not in use for lectures members could read newspapers and periodicals in what was known as the 'basement' of the Corn Exchange. Lectures were given on the 'Black Country and its missions', 'The Life of the first Napoleon', 'The rise and progress of British power in India

from 1600 to the present time', A Voyage up the Nile', 'Early Eastern Monarchies', 'Physiology of Nations', 'Liars and their Lies' and in December 1886 a lecture on 'Beauty'.

The Natural History Society also used one of the rooms (sometimes referred to as the museum). The lecture seasons ran from October/November through until April. Microscopic Soirees where 'numerous and varied objects representing both the animal and vegetable kingdoms, were exhibited, to the delight and instruction of those who were present.' Other lectures, given by local gentry or specialised speakers included; 'Water', 'The Animals of the Bible', 'The Footprints of the Iceni or traces of the old Celtic Inhabitants of Britain', 'The air we Breathe', 'A Common Crawler (a lecture on grubs!)', and in February 1868 a lecture on artificial light which included experiments and a complete working model of the Witney Gas Works in operation.

Jackson's Oxford Journal 17th September 1863

WITNEY.

DINNER AT THE CORN EXCHANGE

On the conclusion of business, a public dinner in honour of the occasion took place in the upper room of the building. Mr. James Gillett, of the Marlborough Arms Inn, catered in a very satisfactory manner, the bill of fare being both abundant and *recherché*. The company numbered a hundred and thirty, the room being rather inconveniently crowded. Leonard Pickering, Esq., provided, and amongst those present were the Rev. W. Mills, the Rev. G. C. Rolfe, J. Preedy, Esq., G. Broom, jun., Esq., The Committee (Viz., N. G. Ravenor, Esq., and Messrs. R. Lord, Joseph Druce, Jonathan Sheldon, S. Lea, E. Seely, W. Morley, J.H. Malder, T. Bliss, H. C. Townsend, H. Akers, J. Dutton, C. Jones, J. Clinch, W. Clinch, and H. Bateman), And Messrs. J.W. Mayou, W. T. Wallis, J. Wallis, T. Akers, G. Akers, E. Early, C. Early, J. Early, C. Clinch, J. Collier (the architect), S. Gillett, T. Gillett, G. Gillett, W. Gillett, S. Druce, B. Druce, J. Bryan, M. Bartlett, J. Nalder, T. Shaldon (Nottingham), W. Pinnock, C. Lord, W. Swinborn, Peters, Castle, A. Blake, T. Blake, E. Lane, R. Eagle, W. Tarrant, J. Akerman, A. Stratton, J. Clark, J. Jones, S. Shuffrey, W. Long, W. Mountain, J. Mountain, W. Edwards, Cuddon, Buckingham, J. Browne, Holloway, T. Staley, W. Cook, C. Cook, H. Walker, J. Weaving, J. Paxton, W. Wurley, J. Wurley, Morris, &c.

The loyal toast having been duly honoured, the
CHAIRMAN

said they now came to the toast of the evening, and he sincerely regretted that the task had not fallen to some gentleman better qualified than himself. (No, no.) He most cordially congratulated the town of Witney on having erected such an elegant and commodious room for the transaction of business – a building equally adapted for purposes of business and of recreation. (Applause.) It had, as they all knew, been that day inaugurated for its primary use, that of a Corn Exchange, and he thought the Directors might already congratulate themselves on its doecided success. He understood that a hundred day tickets had that afternoon been disposed of, and that 28 of the stands had been let. This he considered was no bad beginning, and he had not the slightest doubt that in a very short time the demand for accommodation would be fully equal to what their magnificent room could afford. (Applause.) He need not expatiate to men of business better acquainted with the matter than himself, on the great benefit which would accrue from a building like this. A Corn Exchange had become an institution of the country, a necessity of the age in which we lived, and he sincerely trusted that the benefit of the new edifice would extend to all classes of the community. He begged to give them “success to the Witney Corn Exchange.”

The toast was drunk with “three times three.”

Mr. E. EARLY said he had been requested to propose a toast, than which none could have given him greater gratification; it was “prosperity to agriculture.” (Cheers.)

It might appear strange that this should be proposed by one who owed his all to manufactures, but though he was proud of his order, and proud of that commerce which brought to us the produce of all parts of the world, he had from his earliest youth sympathised with agricultural pursuits, the success of which was bound up with the best interest of the country, and of manufactures also. Some of his best and most enduring friendships, moreover, he formed when a young man with some of the agriculturists of the neighbourhood; those friendships had continued for a long course of years, and he trusted would endure as long as he lived. He was very pleased to think that the antagonistic feeling which used to exist between manufactures and agriculture had in our day totally disappeared, and that agriculturists, tradesmen, and manufacturers could meet in a room erected by their united exertions, and shake hands as in a temple of peace, wishing each other every prosperity. (Applause.) Those somewhat advanced in life could well remember the time when such a feeling did not exist, and when even at social festivities jealousy was sometimes exhibited. It might not be known to all of them that in this very neighbourhood a feud existed for forty or sixty years almost as bitter as that between the Federals and Confederates in America, though happily it did not extend to bloodshed. There was a time when an array of Witney Weavers sallied into the neighbouring villages to coerce and intimidate the agriculturists, and they went round with a wagon and a rope, with which they threatened to hang every farmer who did not sell his corn for 50f. a load. (Laughter.) So strong

was the animosity aroused, that many of the agriculturalists kept away from Witney market in consequence. To-day, however, they were all met – agriculturists, tradesmen, bankers, and manufacturers – in a room erected for their common use, to enjoy each others societies and to wish each other prosperity. He sincerely trusted that such a feeling would never be disturbed, and that they themselves and their descendants would often assemble in that room to enjoy the same social festivity as they had that day - experienced. He would not longer trespass on their time, but would ask them to drink with him success to the agricultural interest in general and that of his neighbourhood in particular, coupling with it the health of one of their agriculturalists in that locality, Mr. Wallis. (Applause.)

Mr. WALLIS was deeply obliged to them for the honour they had done him, but though he had been a farmer in this neighbourhood about 33 years, and elsewhere for several years previously, he was not thorough-bred in the profession, having spent the early part of his life in a commercial house. It had, however, been his lot to follow the plough, and in his long experience he had seen many ups and downs in farming, but while here and there he had seen a man thrifty, lucky, and careful, who had done well, and while the agriculturists, as a body, were given to hospitality and kindly feeling, and were much esteemed by their neighbours, farming was not so very profitable a business as many considered it. (Hear, hear.) An outsider might look at a farmer's fields of corn, and at his horses and cattle, but he forgot the outlay which was necessary to produce all this. He had

not a word to say, however, against agricultural pursuits, for he much enjoyed them; a man was not called away from his home, as in the medical or legal profession, his time was more at his own disposal, and if not quite so profitable, farming was very conducive to health, so that one thing made up for another. (Applause.) He felt very great pleasure in meeting in that building. During his long residence in this locality, he had seen many changes in Witney Market. He remembered the time when it was held before dinner in the pig market; afterwards it became an after-dinner affair, and now they were advancing, and had obtained this handsome building. Wherever there were plenty of buyers there were sure to be plenty of sellers, and *vice versa*, and he hoped the new Exchange would bring together buyers and sellers, and would conduce to the welfare and prosperity of the town. (Applause.)

THE CHAIRMAN said the next toast was "success to the trade of Witney." (Applause). The majority of those present were agriculturists, but they were well aware that trade and agriculture must flourish or fall together, and that, like The Siamese twins, if one dies the other could not survive. Such meetings as this, therefore, were well adapted to keep up a good feeling between the two, and he trusted they would

always extend to each other the hand of good fellowship. (Applause).

Mr. CHARLES EARLY responded to the toast, which he observed was very appropriate to the occasion, for he anticipated that the erection of the Corn Exchange would be pro=

ductive of great advantage to the town. The manufacturers and traders of Witney had for many years past suffered very severely for want of those business opportunities and facilities which most other towns had enjoyed, and he trusted that now those difficulties were removed, and that they had not only a Railway but a Corn Exchange, the latent energies of the trading community would be more fully developed, and that the young men especially would pat their shoulders to the wheel, and while indulging in a game of cricket now and then, would not forget the more serious duties of life. By labouring in their various callings, and by striving to promote their own interests, they would further the welfare of the town generally. He thought it was a happy circumstance and one for which they ought to be very grateful to Divine Providence, that the opening of this Exchange had been contemporaneous with the most abundant harvest that had ever been known, so that the gentlemen who tilled the ground and reaped the golden fruit could afford them a cheap loaf. It was a very happy circumstance that they could thus rejoice in each other's prosperity, and wish each other God speed. (Cheers.)

THE CHAIRMAN remarked that there was a body of gentlemen to whom they were much indebted for the amount of labour and trouble they had taken in carrying out the erection of the building. He begged to propose "The Health of the Corn Exchange Committee", coupling therewith the name of Mr. Joseph Druce. (Applause.)

Mr. DRUCE, in responding, assured them that his brother Directors and himself had felt great pleasure in rendering what services they were able. The splendid building that day inaugurated would, he felt sure, be a great success not only in point of usefulness but in a pecuniary aspect. (Applause.) The Chairman had told them the number present that day, and he had no doubt that they would continue to have a flow of visitors and men of business, for when they had a place in which they could carry on their business, people would be sure to come and trade with them.

THE CHAIRMAN observed that he did not know whether the noble facade facing the Market-place was Doric, Ionic, or Corinthian, but it was exceedingly pleasing, and the whole building did great credit to the architect. They could not, therefore, do any less than drink his health, and wish him every possible success, thanking him also for so excellent a specimen of his ability. (Applause.)

MR. COLLIER returned thanks, hoping that the building would be found suitable for its intended purposes, and would increase the market and trade of Witney. (Cheers.)

THE CHAIRMAN next gave "The health of Mr, Bartlett, the builder," who carried out architect's design in a most substantial and creditable manner. (Applause.)

THE CHAIRMAN then proposed "The health of Mr. Ravenor," the Secretary of the Corn Exchange Company, to whose valuable services a great part of the merit was due.

MR. JAMES CLINCH said he was quite convinced that the toast he was about to give would be warmly received. It

was the health of a gentleman whom most of them knew, many intimately, and whom they all respected and esteemed. He was a supporter of every project which promoted the welfare of the neighbourhood, had rendered material assistance to that building, and had consented at very short notice to take a prominent part in that day's proceedings. He gave them "The health of their worthy Chairman." (Loud Cheers.)

THE CHAIRMAN said that, judging by their cheers, he supposed something very complimentary had been said of him, but happily for his modesty, he was rather deaf, and had not heard a word of it. (Laughter.) He had great pleasure in being present that day, as he had met many with whom he had long been on terms of friendship, and he hoped they would meet in that building for many years to come. (Applause.)

Mr. CLINCH, in responding to the toast of his health, said that the town had long felt the want of a building which would accommodate their literary and scientific associations, and where lectures and entertainments could take place. The agriculturists, too, had an idea that in other towns they transacted business with a roof over their heads, and that there was no reason why Witney should be an exception. so they laid their heads together and thought they might erect a building which would meet both their wants; the money was easily raised, and that handsome and commodious building was the result. (Applause.)

MR. EARLY proposed "Success to the Witney Railway" with thanks to the Directors in bringing a railway to the town. (Applause.)

MR. H. AKERS, in responding, said the company had had many difficulties to contend with, and the pecuniary return for their money was at present very small. Great indirect benefit had, however, been obtained by the cheapening of commodities and the facilities for traffic, and he hoped at no distant day the undertaking would produce a fair dividend. (Applause.)

The remaining toasts were "Walter Strickland, Esq., the Chairman of the Board of Directors;" "The Corn Dealers attending the Market;" "The Natural History Society and Athenaeum" coupled with the name of Mr. Purdue; "The Visitors," "The Press," and "The Ladies."

On the Chairman's leaving, the conviviality was kept up till a late hour under the successive presidency of Mr. Wallis and Mr. Townsend, various songs being given, and the utmost harmony and good feeling being manifes

AS A PUBLIC HALL



1860's - 1900's

At the beginning of this period the Corn Exchange was extensively being used as a Public Hall with regular and annual events, balls and concerts but as the years went on its popularity began to suffer and other public halls and meeting places were being built in Witney, like the Masonic Hall, Coffee Tavern and Wesleyan Church.

Kelly's trade directory of 1864 described the building to the rest of the country as follows....

"The Corn Exchange, erected in 1863, by a public company at a cost of £2500, is a handsome stone structure, standing in the Market Place: the basement contains several spacious rooms, and the Market Hall, where the business is transacted: in the upper part of the building is a fine public hall, with offices and retiring rooms, where assemblies, balls, and exhibitions take place, and meetings of the town and neighbourhood are held.... there are two admirable institutions in the town.

The Natural History Society and the Athenaeum. The lectures in connection with each of these societies, held at the Corn Exchange, are most numerous attended, and of first class order.”

The Corn Returns Office was listed under ‘public establishments’ at the Corn Exchange with Inspector named as James Hewett.

As well as the Athenaeum and Natural History Society the Mechanics Institute had their regular meetings in the building and several ecclesiastical events were held in the 1860’s including a public meeting in 1865 to discuss the restoration of Witney Church, a meeting on behalf of the South African Missions in December 1866, the Oxford University Amateur Orpheus Society Concert in the aid of the Church choir fund in January 1869 and the ‘Glee and Madrigal Society’ Concert in November 1867 for the benefice of the Church restoration fund. Concerts held included a Tradesmen’s Ball in 1869, and Invitational Ball and two, “consisting of some very amusing comic and other singing, together with a violin performance” along with Minstrels performances. An annual show of the Oxford Chrysanthemum Society was held in November 1869 and after the annual Flower Show a concert was held in the Corn Exchange in August 1870 and ‘the audience was the largest ever assembled in the Exchange.’

In 1871 'The Tyrolese Singers' held a concert in the Corn Exchange and later in the year, Mr Mason Esq. of Eynsham hosted a sumptuous banquet. Further concerts were held in 1872 by the Athletic Sports Committee and once again, after the Horticultural Show with music from the band of the Grenadier Guards. 'The Exchange was crowded to excess and the concert gave the greatest satisfaction.' A meeting for 'The Society for the propagation of the Gospel' was held by the rector in Dec 1871 followed by the annual examination of Wesleyan School children and,

"Miss Louisa Payne, assisted by eminent vocalists gave a concert at the Corn Exchange, which was filled by the elite of the town and neighbourhood. Many of the pieces were encored, and the concert was one of the best ever given in the town."

During the 1870's further soirees, theatrical entertainments and concerts were held. Witney Choral Society gave several performances. In 1874 a 'magical, comical, musical and sensational entertainment was given at the Corn Exchange on Wednesday last, it was however, thinly attended, although very amusing' and in 1876 a 'high class' musical and ventriloquial entertainment was given by Messrs. Bruce and Verne. The annual Twelfth Night dance took place – an event which would last well into the next century with games and Punch and Judy for the children – tickets in 1875 were one

shilling each for children under 14 years of age and two shillings above. A meeting of Gardner's Manure Company was held in November 1874 and in January 1879 The Church of England Band of Hope had a tea and magical lantern entertainment where 300 children were entertained.

Witney's first Chess Club was formed out of the Athenaeum Group and the first tournament was held at the Corn Exchange in 1878 – they would go on to have weekly meetings in the building on Wednesdays with the 'Greeks' versus the 'Trojans'.

More meetings took place including a lecture on Temperance, sales of works and meetings of the Mendicity Society and a medical dispensary meeting. 'Blind Concert' was held in 1880 which was in fact a concert given by a company of performers from the Wilberforce School for the Blind, York and the Royal Normal College, Norwood. Further entertainment was provided by the Choral Festival of Oxford parish choirs, a Masonic Concert in aid of the funds for restoring Cogges Church and in February 1882, the annual 'free' entertainment was provided with vocal and instrumental music with Witney Town Band – they too held their own concerts as in April 1882 where 'frequent' encores were given. In September 1882, Gompertz's Spectral Opera Company gave a series of performances, the pieces represented were Schiller's Storm of Thoughts, Dickens's Christmas Carol, Bennett's Fairy Opera, The Mountain Sylph, and Gounod's Faust.

The Local Board of Guardians held their meetings in the building and in January 1885, Mr. Lawrence Smythe's Shakespearian Company gave performances at the CE on Friday and Saturday evenings in the last week and a third was planned....but the attendance was so limited that the money taken was returned. A 'Social Tea' was also held where a series of 'popular entertainments took place and the charge for admission was one penny. Also during this time, the 'Royal Poland Street Hand bell Ringers' gave a performance, and in line with the Corn Exchange being a place of learning, Agricultural Science classes took place and in November 1885. On 4th July 1885 at a Wool Sale – 9,000 fleeces pitched, the whole of which were sold at an average of about 20s.

In February 1886, the Witney contingent of C Troop Queens Own Oxfordshire Hussars held their first drill in the CE and Jacksons Journal reported that, 'there was a good muster'. The Freemasons used the Lecture room and it was suggested that a Social Club could be created at the CE but it was deemed unworkable – it would be another 50 years before it finally happened with the formation of the Social Centre.

A meeting was held in December 1887, 'to hear the principles of "Co-operation" explained by members of societies at Oxford and Reading. Speeches were made for and against, and at the close between thirty and forty persons gave in their names as willing to become members.' An annual event was the 'Witney Deanery Conference' held by the church like the one in August 1888. In March 1889 a 'Smoking Concert'

was held and a meeting of the “Central Sunday Closing Association was held - where they voted unanimously for closure of public houses on Sundays”.

One of the more curious events held at the Corn Exchange was reported in the Witney Gazette on 1st November 1890 when the popular Victorian medicine man or ‘Quack Doctor’ “Sequah” was in town

“...On Saturday he said he would speak in the Corn Exchange at 8 o'clock....within a short time of the doors being opened the room was well filled, notwithstanding that 2d was charged for admission.”

An old Witney tradition was the distribution of bread among the poor of Witney, Hailey, Crawley and Newland under the 1813 Waring Charity, which sometimes took place at the Corn Exchange like in 1901 when the Witney Gazette reported that 2089 loaves were given away.

In March 1901, a concert was held at the Corn Exchange on Easter Monday where there was a display of animated pictures of Queen Victoria’s funeral.

In December 1908 the town bailiffs distributed bread and beef in the Corn Exchange to some 700 people (see picture).

The 1903 Kelly’s Trade Directory had the building described with ‘rooms occupied as reading rooms by the Witney

Athenaeum, and as the Council Chamber by the Urban District Council...the Corn Market is held weekly on Thursdays which is well attended.' And by the time of the 1907 Kelly's Directory the upper part of the building was occupied the Windrush Club. In 1911, the Corn Exchange was listed under public establishments with the Athenaeum reading room and library and 4th battalion Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire light infantry (F Company) were listed as at the Drill Hall, Corn Exchange, Witney.

THE CORN EXCHANGE COMPANY



AND CORN DEALING

The Company meetings were held each year in June and show that for the first few years the finances were precarious and no, or very small dividends were declared for the shareholders. In June 1866 at the annual meeting there were still several debts outstanding and take up of the hall on Market days for dealing was largely unfrequented. In October 1867 the Oxford Journal reported that, "The Directors of the Corn Exchange have decided to open the building for market purposes, free of charge, the public were admitted on the 17th for the first time under the new regulation, which is to continue in force for 12 months." At the annual meeting later in the same year the Company resolved not to let the rooms for any purpose unless it was to do with the Church. By September 1868, the plan to attract people into the Hall was still not working and was reported as,

"...next Thursday and those afterwards, each person will be charged threepence for

admission to the Corn Exchange during Market Hours. The annual subscription is put at 5s. For stands, including admission, the charge will be, as heretofore, one guinea per annum. The plan of having free admission on market days having been tried without success, the Directors have determined to charge for admission in the future."

At some point after this the Corn Exchange for dealing was closed as in January 1870 it was reported that 'the Market Hall which has been closed for some time was re-opened on 6th and the charge both for admission and stands have been greatly reduced.'

However, at the annual meeting of the company in June 1871 expenditure had exceeded receipts and it was resolved that the Market Hall for the future be not opened on Thursdays, no dividend could be declared and that they should hold a special meeting in 4 weeks' time to see what should better be done with the Corn Exchange as a whole.....It was unanimously carried at that meeting that the fixed charge for letting the House be two guineas for a single night, and for every succeeding evening, one guinea. The terms of letting for charitable purposes should be at the discretion of the committee. The Company carried on but with no profits from the building from Thursdays the financial condition of the company was 'anything but satisfactory', and it was thought desirable, on behalf of the Shareholders, to sell the Exchange and they would have another meeting in a month.

In June 1876 at the general meeting the finances were still not good and the income came entirely from the letting of the rooms to permanent tenants or occasional purposes and 'nil' from the returns as a Corn Exchange. The Company determined to wait another year before taking the steps for disposal of the building – they were also mindful that a new roof would soon be required. It was suggested that the Local Board might purchase the building and secure it for the town.

1879 was evidently a very good year for the Hall for events as a small dividend was declared and takings for the letting of the hall were considerably in excess of any prior year and also that year, after a concerted effort by several of the local farmers and dealers to do business under a roof rather than outside the Marlborough Hotel, they decided to take matters into their own hands. On 27th December, a letter from them was published in the Oxford Journal,

“We, the under-signed farmers, corn-dealers, and others accustomed to attend Witney Market, hereby express our opinion that it would be preferable in many ways to hold the Corn Market of the said town in the Corn Exchange, instead of where it is now held, and we further express our willingness to-operate in an endeavour to bring about such a change.”

Within two weeks nearly 100 people had given their opinion in favour of using the Corn Exchange, including the leading buyers and many gentlemen of position and influence in the town and neighbourhood. A meeting was announced for Thursday 15th January to initiate the change.

It appears that this time the venture worked and the Corn Exchange was used properly for the first time since it was built as a Corn Exchange as well as a public hall. At the annual meeting of 1881 the report was more satisfactory than for some years past and there was enough surplus in profits in order to renovate and repair the building and in February 1883 the Journal reported,

“The stands for the current year at the Corn Exchange are taken, and this undertaking now bids fair to prove more re-numerative to the shareholders than in days gone by and a dividend of 2 per cent was declared.”

END OF THE PUBLIC HALLS COMPANY

PURCHASE BY

URBAN DISTRICT COUNCIL

On 30th December 1910, the Corn Exchange Public Halls Company went into voluntary liquidation and in January 1911 a creditor's advert appeared on the front page of the Witney Gazette.

By March of 1911, the Corn Exchange was on the market and after several meetings at the Corn Exchange and letters that were sent into the Witney Gazette suggesting the purchase of the building by the Urban District Council, the sale completed to them on 8th December 1911. On 9 Dec 1911 at a meeting of the Urban District Council The Clerk produced for sealing a mortgage on the rates for £3,400 to the Liverpool and Victoria and Legal Friendly Society, at 3 ½ %, re-payable in 30 years, in equal half-yearly instalments, in connection with the purchase of the Corn Exchange.

The building continued to be used as a Corn Exchange but the front part was used by the Council as offices and council meetings were held there.

VOTES FOR WOMEN

On 25th April 1914, the Witney Gazette reported that, 'The Suffrage meeting which is to be held in the Corn Exchange on Friday April 24th is being arranged by the Oxford branch of the National Union of Women's Suffrage Society.'

THE CORN EXCHANGE



FIRST WORLD WAR 1914-1918

During the First World War the Corn Exchange was still regularly being used and was run by the Council. It was used for public meetings like the one held at the end of August 1914 just after the outbreak of the war. The Witney Gazette report of the 29th August under the heading of Lord Kitchener's Second Army...

There was a crowded attendance of men at the mass meeting at the Corn Exchange on Wednesday evening, held in connection with the recruiting for Lord Kitchener's second army. The large hall was packed, and there was not even standing room, the audience overflowing into the lobby. The Witney Band was present, and previous to the meeting played a selection of patriotic music....the chairman, who met with a hearty reception,

said they lived in stirring times, extraordinary time such as they had never witnessed before – they were at war. He had never dreamt that he would see the day when this nation would be at war with Germany.

The Witney Volunteer Training Corps was formed on 24th October 1914 and the Witney Gazette reported that the first parade of the corps was held at the Corn Exchange on Wednesday, when forty men handed in their names for membership. Recruiting meetings were held there for the corps again in December 1914 when ‘...a crowded meeting of men’ took place. For several of the meetings they held a request was made to the Council for free use of the hall which was duly granted. They appear to have been based there and held weekly drills at the Corn Exchange on a Thursday evening for the remainder of the war. A letter was read at a Council meeting at the end of November 1918 from Cpt. G H Dawkins, enclosing a cheque for rent of the Corn Exchange for Volunteer Drills and giving notice to leave on 31st December. The letter conveyed the thanks of the volunteers to the Council for use of the Exchange for the last 4 years.

Dances and Concerts continued to take place like the Belgian Refugee Concert in November 1914. 347 Company MT. A S C held a dance in the on Saturday 16th October 1914 in aid of the Red Cross Fund at which ‘there was a crowded

attendance'. Musical boys from Dr Barnardo's Home gave an evening performance in the Corn Exchange in 1915 as did the band of the 28th Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers who gave a concert there. In September 1917 wounded officers from Shipton Court gave 'an entertainment' and in 1918 there were YMCA and RAF Dances and Whist Drives. There were also lectures such as one in September 1915 given by Miss Rene Juts on the subject of 'Work amongst French wounded' and in February 1917 a meeting in connection with the Witney War Savings Association was held. A National Service public meeting took place at the Corn Exchange in April 1917 and war time cookery lectures were given there over a series of evening in June 1917. In October 1916 14 additional Special Constables were sworn in there for the township of Witney.

On 23 November 1918 the Witney Gazette reported that a public meeting was convened by Witney Urban District Council for the purpose of considering a scheme for a memorial of those of this town who have fallen in this war, was held at the Corn Exchange on Tuesday.

THE CORN EXCHANGE



BETWEEN THE WARS

After the First World War the Corn Exchange returned to its former glory as a place for balls, concerts and meetings for local societies and by the 1920's the Corn Exchange Yard housed the Fire Brigade, Ambulance and the local Depot.

Booking requests from the 1920's show requests from touring theatre companies. Bookings included; Leah Kleschna by the Oxford Amateur Dramatics Club, The Arts League of Service (an association to bring the arts into everyday life), the Banbury Division of the Oxfordshire Liberal and Radical Association, the Dallas Yorke repertoire Company (including Miss Dallas Yorke), W.W Bell and Company acting on behalf of the Canadian Govt for an illustrated lecture on the country.

By 1922, the Corn Market was held solely in the Exchange and corn-dealing is shown in a letter from Pugsley and Wakelin Ltd (Millers and Grain Importers) of Cardiff shows - they had paid 1 guinea in settlement of their subscription there but the trade had largely stopped by the 1930's. At this time there were also discussions to convert the rear brick

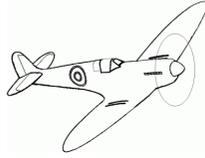
buildings of the Exchange into bath houses but they didn't materialise. Throughout this time, the hall and the first floor buffet room were used for concerts, dances, dramatic functions and lectures. The Witney and District Musical Competition Festivals were held there, political meetings like the Labour Party meeting in August 1928 and Saturday Night Dancing was a weekly event. The Witney Orchestral and Choral Societies were re-introduced after a gap of several years.

A small public library was run in partnership with the County Council in the 1930's, staffed by volunteers – it was first housed in the old fire station on the High Street but later in the Corn Exchange.

In 1938, a joint ambulance committee was formed with the Rural District Council, and in the same year the St Johns Ambulance Brigade was given premises at the Corn Exchange. A mortuary was built in the yard at about this time for shared use.

The Urban District Council met there every 2-4 weeks but left the Corn Exchange in September 1936 to move to premises on Church Green so from September the building reverted to being for the use of the Exchange and for public functions and dances.

THE CORN EXCHANGE



1930's and 1940's

In 1939 the Corn Exchange was requisitioned by the Military and was later taken over by the Ministry of Labour who sponsored the establishment of a Witney Social Centre in 1941 – mainly to provide entertainment for the soldiers (see Witney Social Centre). At the beginning of 1939 the Corn Exchange was in need of repair and was still regularly being used as its sole use as a public hall. In January, the Public Buildings Committee declined a request from the British Legion with regard to letting of the top floor and one of the lower front rooms of the building for a club because, as reported in the Witney Gazette on 27th January 1939, ‘...the large hall was let mostly for dances and it was essential that they had the top room for refreshments.’ They further discussed the re-decoration of the Exchange and the decoration of the large hall had an estimate of £12 and £5 for repair of the lavatories. Mr. Taphouse. ‘hoped the money for repairs would be passed as it would make it more homely’,

“It’s a drab, dreary place at the moment” he added

In February 1939 the annual WITNEY FAT STOCK SHOW DANCE took place at the Corn Exchange as part of the Shrove Tuesday activities. The 'Blue Star Players' were employed for the occasion and dancing was listed from 9-1.30.

The Council reported that in June 1939 it inspected the old poultry shed at the Corn Exchange with a view to providing accommodation for the old fire engine and altered the south end of the stable to form a club room for members of the Fire Brigade. The Kelly's Trade Directory of Witney in 1939 has the following entry,

"The Witney Fire Brigade and Motor Ambulance at the Corn Exchange Buildings, consist of two fire engines and motor ambulance, with telephone connection with all members, consisting of 12 men and 2 officers. The service covers the whole of the urban and a portion of the rural district."

In 1939 some 400 evacuees were billeted by September for whom Christmas parties were staged at the Corn Exchange and the 50th or 51st Division were in occupation there for the first few months of the war.

Now well into the Second World War, on 28th March 1941, the Witney Gazette reported on the meeting of the Urban District Council where, "The question of removing the iron

railings in front of the Corn Exchange in response to an appeal of the government for scrap metal was considered after its adjournment from the last meeting. The removal was decided upon by a majority of 5 to 2 and householders are asked to give railings for the same purpose." They were removed not long after leaving the building looking slightly less grand than before.

The Corn Exchange, as well as other local establishments took centre stage during 'Witney War Weapons Week with events being held there most days of the week. The events held at the Corn Exchange can be seen below.

Saturday 13th September 1941 8-12pm –

Popular Dance in the Corn Exchange. *Civilians 3/-; H.M.
Forces 1/-*

Monday 15th September 1941 7.30pm –

Military Band Concert in the Corn Exchange.

Tickets numbered and reserved 2/6; reserved 1/6.

Tuesday 16th September 1941 8.30pm – 1.30 am –

Special Attraction Dance in the Corn Exchange. *Admission
5/-.*

Thursday 18th September 1941 7.30pm -

Dart Competition Finals in the Corn Exchange. *Admission to
Corn Exchange by purchase of 6d. National
Savings Stamps.*

Friday 19th September 1941 7.30pm -

Variety Concert in the Corn Exchange. *Tickets; numbered and reserved 2/6
reserved 1/6.*

Saturday 20th September 1941 8.0-12.0 -

Popular Dance in the Corn Exchange. *Civilians 3/- H.M.
Forces 1/-.*

WITNEY SOCIAL CENTRE



AT THE CORN EXCHANGE 1941-1959

The Social Centre opened in 1941 and the official constitution was formulated in 1943 to 'promote the well-being of the inhabitants of the town of Witney and of the parishes adjacent thereto, for such purposes as may by law be deemed to be charitable by associating the Local Authority and those organisations which are or may be for the time being concerned in a common effort to further health, to advance social, recreational, educational, and cultural interests and to foster a community spirit of co-operation with neighbours and fellow citizens for the achievement of such purposes as aforesaid, and to establish, maintain and manage a Social Centre and arrange for Playing Fields for activities promoted by the Centre in furtherance of the above objects or any one of them." Although the Urban District Council was represented on the committee it had no direct control over the building other than being the landlord, receiving rent for the accommodation.

In 1946, the Management Committee minute books show groups that had booked the hall and events that were being held throughout the year at the Corn Exchange; they included; Swan Laundry Dance, Women's Land Army Welfare Fund, British Legion Social Evening, Witney Canine Society, Mother's Union, Oxford Co-operative Society, Royal School of Music, Old Grammarians, Fire Service Dance and Conservative Dance.

It appears that there was a problem with persons causing disturbances late in the evening at dances being held at the Corn Exchange so at a meeting in July 1946 about Saturday dances it was agreed that there would be no reduction in the price of admission for latecomers after 10pm as there had been previously. It was further agreed to put a table in front of the ticket office to allow control of entrants.

Early in 1947 it was discovered that there was no lease for the Corn Exchange which led to heated discussions with the Urban Council being held later in the year where they report that there was , 'considerable opposition on the part of certain sections who wish the Corn Exchange to revert in its old status '.

Much work also had to be undertaken. In 1948 the Chief Fire Officer gave a list of urgent things that had to be done – panels in the Oak doors at the back of the stage had to be made solid, alternative gas lighting needed to be provided for exits in the main hall and the entrance hall, fire extinguishers needed to be overhauled with extra ones fitted at the side of

the stage and all temporary additions to lighting be dismantled or replaced by permanent wiring. The stage curtains and the stage arch also needed to be fireproofed again.

Other events held at the Corn Exchange during this time included hypnotists, political meetings, a live show on BBC Radio Ruffles Midland Regional Programme was booked in for 2/3 March 1949. A youth centre was also created and many sporting activities were held there. An 'Old Time Ball' was held on 31 Jan 1947 where all the tickets were sold, Police dances, RAF Concerts and Benevolent Fund, Newland Athletic Club, the Polling Day fee in 1947 was £10-10-0. St Georges Day dance 23 April 1947, Police Safety Film 9 May 1947, St Giles Concert Party, Young Farmer's Drive, Mayor of Oxford Flood Relief Fund (1948), Women's Institute, Red Cross, YMCA Whist Drives, Cookery Demonstrations on Sunday afternoons took place from 1949. Weekly Dances were held on Thursday evenings but due to falling numbers were made twice weekly from then. Country Dances were tried in the summer of 1949 but 'both dances resulted in a loss and it was decided to discontinue' them for a further year. Poultry Drive, Carol Concerts and in 1950, pantomimes, a camera club met there. Celebrity Concerts were held regularly and Habgood and Mammett also held auctions in the building.

Electric Lighting

At a meeting at the beginning of 1949 a three point electric light fitting was shown and the warden expected that it

would cost about £3 per fitting. It was proposed that these candelabra light fittings should be placed on the walls of the main hall and that 15 fittings would be required. Shades would cost 8/- extra. They agreed to allow the sum of £60 for them to be fitted.

At the annual meeting of the Social Centre in May 1957, they stated that they believed the Centre was the only completely self-supporting community venture of its kind in Great Britain. They held an Open week later that year showing the events on offer there – they provided for Amateur Dramatics, Table Tennis, Old Time Dancing, Modern Dance, The Orchestra Society and the Choral Society. Boxing was also held there from the same year. The recruitment drive must have been successful as the Witney Gazette reported that the Centre was hoping for 1000 members on 21 March 1958 and Jazz evenings would be a regular fixture on Wednesday evenings.

The Social Centre ran into financial difficulties in the 1950's and in August 1958 a story appeared in the Witney Gazette about unpaid rent to the Council and later in the year urged the people of Witney to support the centre it would close in April but eventually the Social Centre closed on 31st December.

FIRST WITNEY TRADE FAIR

AT THE

CORN EXCHANGE 1956

On the 18th June 1956 the Witney Gazette reported under the headline, "Witney Trade Fair gets go ahead" The organising Committee recently announced that the exhibition will be staged in the Social Centre (corn Exchange) and Drill Hall from Wednesday October 24th to Saturday 27th inclusive. They later reported in 1960 that there would have been an exhibition as early as 1934 and that approximate estimates of the cost were produced at the time – the cost for hiring the Corn Exchange would have been £8 for the week but this evidently never materialised.

Back in 1956, the paper had double-page spreads with diagrams announcing exhibitors and where they would be in the halls.

1960's and 1970's



PURCHASE BY WITNEY TOWN COUNCIL AND RE-OPENING OF THE CORN EXCHANGE

For a short time, the Council, as the owners ran the hall but soon ran into difficulties as the hall, now over a hundred years old, badly needed renovation and modernisation and damage from the war years – growing failure to comply with modern standard of heating, safety and general amenity. At a meeting of the Witney Urban District Council in January 1960 Mr Causer said ‘that the building was not what it used to be, namely a meeting place for important social functions.’ And it was suggested that the time had come to reconsider being kept for this purpose. The only way it could be made an attractive place was by complete re-construction...mere decoration would be a waste of money. It was further suggested that shops could be put in the front of it, then reducing the size of the hall and eliminating its use for large

functions might be an answer to the problem. Another member asked if they should consider leasing the building as a commercial premises, and by doing so, getting enough rent to pay any interest charge to build a new place with car-park facilities.

Nonetheless, events still continued to be held at the Corn Exchange, mainly annual ones like the pantomime and in December 1960 the first wrestling match in Witney was held there. In July 1961 in order to discourage pigeons gathering on the Corn Exchange, a certain substance was put on part of the projecting stonework of the building – the idea, to stop birds alighting. In 1968 the Council acquired the old Territorial Drill Hall (Langdale Hall) and the Corn Exchange was closed.

On 6 Feb 1970, one hundred and seven years after being built, the Corn Exchange was first Grade II listed – the listing said....

Corn Exchange, now offices. Built 1863. Squared and coursed limestone, with rusticated pilaster strips and dressings; gabled Welsh-slate roof; stone end stacks. Italian Classical style. 2 storeys; symmetrical 3-window range. Semi-circular arched doorway with rusticated surrounds to panelled double-leaf doors; balcony above supported by 2 huge brackets with carved flower swags. Door flanked by tripartite plate-glass sashes with

rusticated segmental-arched architraves. First-floor cross-windows set in moulded stone architraves with bracketed cornices and central segmental pediment. Modillioned stone cornice beneath low parapet. Consoles flank central open-pedimented gable with ball finials and lunette. Keyed raised architraves to right side wall and long rear wing of one-storey, 5-window range, interior: mid C19 stairs, dado in room to left, and braced queen-post roof in first-floor chamber

When local government was re-organised in 1974 after a lengthy battle between Witney Town Council and the Urban District Council were granted the building as at the time it was not in use and not being used as a public hall and was described as being in a deplorable state. Various proposals were discussed at the time to see how the building could be better used – whether to use it as offices or sell it on the open market. This resulted in a public outcry in Witney and the Deputy Mayor, Arthur Titherington organised a public petition in order to save the hall for community use and succeeded in obtaining over one thousand signatures which resulted in the building being re-sold to the Town Council in July 1977 for £10,000.

In June 1976 a committee was formed and external help was sought to restore the Corn Exchange and work final began by

the Oxford firm Hinkins and Frewin in April 1978. Many of the original characteristics were saved, including, the original wall panelling in the hall, many of the original oak doors and the original balcony balustrade. The cost being in the region of £150,000

Re-opening of the Corn Exchange 1979

The Corn Exchange officially re-opened on 17th February 1979 by the Mayor Michael Chadwick after laying empty for 10 years. A copy of the Speech given is on display below. The following week the building was offered free of charge to local societies and an event was offered for each evening.

Programme of events

The week long programme of events at the Corn Exchange kicks off on Monday, February 19 with a series of exhibitions and a play organised by West Oxfordshire Technical College.

The exhibition of college work and displays from local groups will be open all day. And in the evening TOOT, The Other Oxfordshire Theatre, will present the first public performance of a play "The Immigrants."

For the rest of the week the programme line-up is:

February 20 — Witney Field Club. February 21 — Wenrisc Singers. February 22 — Witney Camera Club. February 23 — A combined concert with Witney Dramatic Society, Brize Norton Singers and local dancing schools. February 24 — Witney Rotary Club presents a Palace of Varieties, an extravaganza of local talent. March 1 — Concert with the Blue Velvet Youth Dance Orchestra.

MODERN CORN EXCHANGE



AND DARK DAYS

The Corn Exchange, now aged and in need of repair continued to be used for large gatherings, events for local societies, annual pantomimes and sales and markets held in the Main Hall.

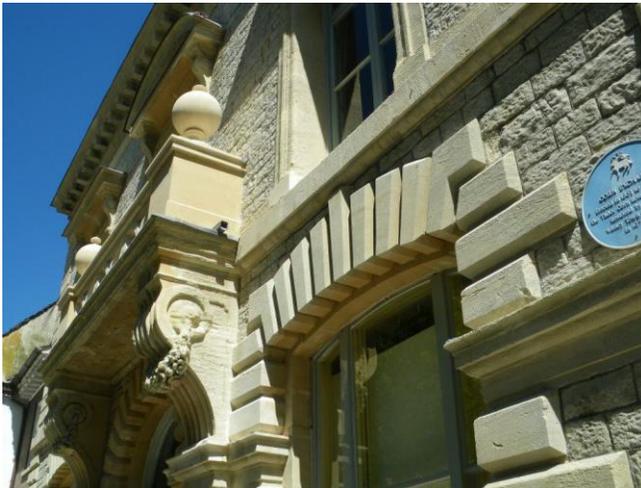
The building was re-modelled internally and folding seating was installed in the principal ground floor room and the Corn Exchange cinema opened in November 1992 – it was initially operated by City Screen Ltd but was then taken over by Witney Screen Ltd who operated it from 1995-1997 when it closed. It re-opened in late 1997 and was re-named Screen @ the Square.

Organisations that still used the Corn Exchange included; Witney Horticultural Society, Witney and District Historical and Archaeological Society, Musical theatres, Witney Amateur Dramatics Society, speaking and singing competitions, Witney Film Festival, Hearing dogs for deaf people, Abdabs Youth Theatre, various meetings. On 4th

February 2004 BBC Radio 4's Gardener's Question Time recorded programmes.

In 2011, during an annual inspection safety concerns were raised and the building was closed to the public.

A feasibility study was carried out in the summer of 2013 and the Council's vision was to provide an "affordable, accessible, multi-purpose flexible Community Heritage and Arts Centre for Witney and West Oxfordshire that would have a reputation for excellence." The exterior of the building was restored, including the re-instatement of the balcony and a clock on top in 2012.



At the end of 2014, the builders, J Knowle and Sons began work of major re-construction in the Corn Exchange.

ROYAL EVENTS



AT THE CORN EXCHANGE

Prince of Wales Marriage 1863

Before the Corn Exchange was officially opened an event was held there to celebrate the marriage of the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VII). In June a committee was assembled as to what form the event should take place and it appears that the Corn Exchange was almost ready as it was reported,

“The Corn Exchange, although incomplete, is calculated to accommodate 800 persons; Mr Bartlett, the builder, has consented to its being used, on condition that he is indemnified from all injury to the building.”

The Oxford Journal reported that “The Corn Exchange was brilliantly lighted with a star of great dimensions” and the following week had a full report of the festivities which can be seen separately.

Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee 1887

The year started with Mr. Taunts 'Jubilee Entertainment' in connection with the Witney Church of England Band of Hope as reported in the Witney Gazette on 15th January 1887. 'Mr. Taunt of Oxford, came over to the CE on Tuesday evening last and gave his new entertainment, "The Queen's Jubilee", being scene and story of 50 years of English history. At half past five the Band of Hope children sat down to a substantial tea, after which the Exchange was cleared as far as practicable and the second part of the proceedings commenced before a large assembly of children and friends. The entertainment included 80 pictures, illustrated by Mr. Taunts oxy- hydrogen lantern and concluded with illustrations from life models of the touching story of "How Bessie Saved her Lover from Execution" and then a series of laughable moving slides.

Meetings were held in the Corn Exchange early in the year, but there appeared to be little interest until the end of May when it was decided to canvass the town in order to see how much money could be got towards a dinner for the men and a tea for the women and children. Sadly this fell through due to insufficient subscriptions. Eventually the town did decide to commemorate the occasion and the events at the Corn Exchanged were described in the Witney Express on 23 June 1887,

“Provision was made in the Corn Exchange and Town Hall for the older inhabitants of the town. The Corn Exchange was prettily decorated with red, white and blue hangings, flags and motto cards, at the end of the room being the words “In the Queen’s name welcome” worked in crimson and gold. About 200 old Witney people, widows, soldiers, wives and a few others, sat down at four o’clock, to a substantial tea given by Mr J H Shayler...The tables were adorned with flowers, and were well supplied with veal and ham, tongue, mutton, beef and lighter provisions. Mr J Owens accompanied “God Save the Queen” on the piano, and played a selection of music in the room...It should be added that all the guests at the Corn Exchange received a ‘silver’ star in commemoration of the event.”

Queen Victoria’s Diamond Jubilee 1897

It appears that the festivities took similar form to those ten years earlier and on 26 June it was reported like this

“...At 12.30 200 people of the town who were 60 years and over sat down to a sumptuous free dinner at the Corn Exchange, served up in good style by Mr Hadley, of the Fleece Hotel.

There were three tables running down the whole of the large hall, laden with good old English fare – roast beef, mutton, lamb, and plum puddings.”

King George V’s Silver Jubilee 1935

At 3.30pm a Children’s Tea was held at the Corn Exchange. All children under 16 years of age in the Witney Urban District were invited and each child was given a jubilee mug as a memento of the occasion. At 7pm there was an “Old people’s Dinner” followed by a concert at 8pm by the Red triangle Club Male Voice Choir. The Witney Gazette reported...

“The Hall, which was packed, almost to its capacity, was prettily festooned with red, white and blue streamers, and the tables had flower decorations of the same colours. An excellent meal was provided and other fare included beer, tobacco and sweets...It was obvious by the smiling faces that the old people were having the time of their lives. A concert was provided by the Witney Red Triangle Male voice choir. By means of a loud speaker the old folk were able to hear the King’s speech which they followed with great attention.”

Coronation of George VI

An old persons dinner was held at the Corn Exchange and followed the same format as the Silver Jubilee but was a less grand affair.

In the first week of June 1977 for Queen Elizabeth II's Silver Jubilee there was an exhibition at the Corn Exchange of Witney and previous jubilees.

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NOTES

