



WITNEY

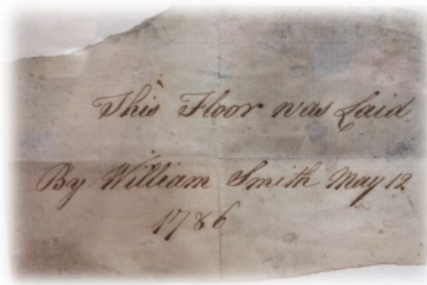
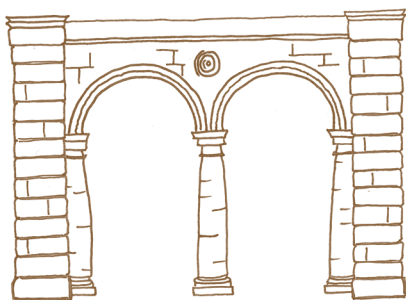


TOWN HALL



There has been a Town Hall or Guild Hall in Witney from early times probably on or near to its current site in the Market Place at the epicentre of the original town and opposite the Buttercross, the town's ancient monument. The Hall (probably a Tudor style building) was mentioned from the 16th Century when 15s was left towards its building or rebuilding (roughly £300 today) and Borough courts met there by the 1550's. Official business and possibly social functions were held there from the 17th century.

Like many other town halls of this period, it had an open market area on the ground floor and a meeting room above. Part of the lower floor appears to have been enclosed by 1683, when a lessee agreed to erect new wattle and plaster partitions and inset or replace window-glass but by the 18th Century the Town Hall stood over pillars and the open area was used as a Corn market. The Hall was probably built as a free standing building but there was an annexe built by 1615 which was probably the 'Town House' no 51 Market Square which thereafter belonged to the bailiffs of the town.



The first mention is 1652 when one of the old records resulting from an enquiry carried out by the Cromwell government into the charities in Witney describes a building as the Town House with a corn market under. An architect's report from February 1928 says the building has two distinct dates, the earliest portion comprises the piers, columns and arches from the ground floor level built a little after 1683, the later portion is all above this level. "The extraordinarily fine proportions and Italian manner being found in a town so far west of London at this early date leads to speculation that Sir Christopher Wren's Masons Christopher Kempster and William Strong who hailed from the Burford District could have taken an interest in the new building of a Town Hall close to their homes.

The above paper stating that the floor was laid by William Smith May 12th 1786, was found under the floor of the Council Chamber during 20th Century renovations



From the late 17th Century the meeting room or 'Chamber' was leased with or without the Town House and there was more than likely a bell for when courts and meetings were held there. In 1772 a fire engine in a newly erected engine house was mentioned at the Town Hall, presumably also under the Chamber.



By the 18th century there was a small lock up either under the chamber or nearby and the whole adjoining central block had been built.

The Town Hall was rebuilt in 1785-86 using stone from quarries at Black Bourton with a ground floor arcaded space of three bays with Tuscan columns and a single meeting room on the first floor. There is speculation over who the architect and builders may have been. Sir William Chambers, who worked at Blenheim Palace and who was responsible for Woodstock Town Hall and the builders from Bath James Gulliver and William Harris are the most likely.

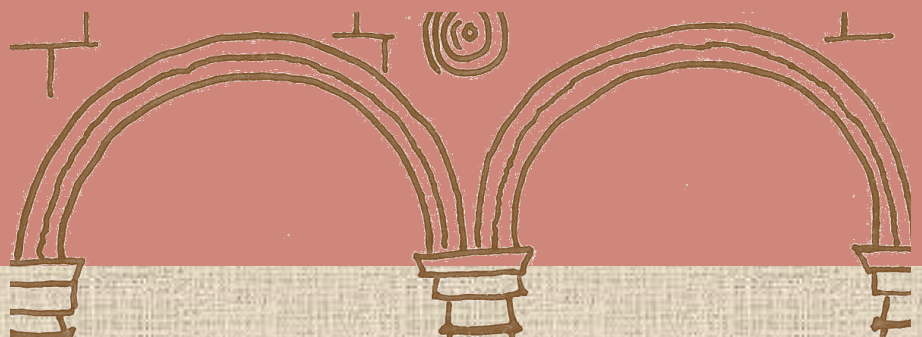


The first known drawing of the Town Hall by William Langford 1832

Vestry and other public meetings were held at the Town Hall from the late 18th Century along with Borough Courts which continued there until 1925 and was the main location for lectures, meetings of local societies such as the Witney Athenaeum and Natural History Society and Auction sales until the Corn Exchange was completed in 1863.

The Hall was in a state of disrepair until fixed in 1876 at which time there were suggestions for filling in the ground floor space to lease as a shop which had happened to the Town House sometime earlier. Several businesses rented the house which included a Drapers, Dingles and today the downstairs is the home of Lily's Attic. The records state that until 1925 there was a large bay window from the Town House, under the Town Hall facing the Buttercross.

A further restoration took place in 1930 and was the vision of Borough Architect Thomas Rayson; this included the creation of new entrance, stairs and inclusion of public conveniences on the ground floor. This resulted in one of the arches being blocked up. From this time until 1974 the building was largely empty.

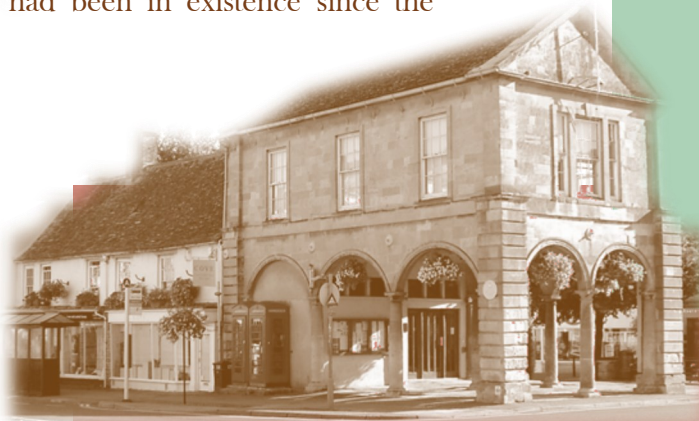




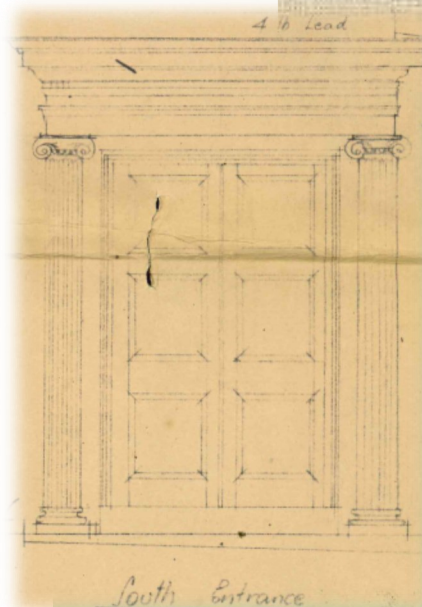
By 1974 the Town Hall was largely empty with only occasional public meetings held there and at one point was rented out as a carpentry. After government re-organisation in 1974 the newly established Witney Town Council were in need of offices and as the building was derelict and was available for immediate accommodation a decision was undertaken to re-use the Town Hall building with the two adjoining cottages.

The final restoration of the Town Hall came in 1976 when after such a long period of neglect the building was restored and refitted for use by the newly established Town Council at a cost of £15,000, the conveniences being removed, and part of the former Town House being converted into offices.

The Town Hall today is still the home of Witney Town Council but is owned by the Town Hall Charity which was created in 1929 by the division of the Witney charities which had been in existence since the 16th Century.



Below is an original drawing by Thomas Rayson of Broad Street, Oxford of the entrance that was built in 1928 which is no longer the main door to the building



TO be SOLD by AUCTION, by WILKINSON and LONG, on Thursday next the 1st of January, 1807.—The modern **HOUSEHOLD FURNITURE and EFFECTS** of a Gentleman in the Neighbourhood, which are removed to the Town Hall, Witney, Oxfordshire, for the Convenience of Sale. . . . The Furniture comprises Four-post and Tent Bedsteads, and Furniture, with Mahogany Feet Posts, seasoned Feather Beds, Bolsters, and Pillows, Blankets, Sheets, Counterpanes, Bed-round and other Carpets, Mahogany Dining and in-laid Pembroke Tables, Chest of Drawers, Chairs, Pier and Swing Glasses, Chimney Ornaments, capital Time Piece, Piano Forte, valuable Painting, Prints, Books, with a Variety of other good Articles, Part of the Kitchen Requisites, and other Effects. May be viewed the Morning of Sale till Ten o'Clock, at which Time the Auction will commence. Catalogues may be had at the Inns in the Neighbourhood, Place of Sale, and of the Auctioneers, at Witney aforesaid.

Jackson's Oxford
Journal 1806



Thank you for visiting Witney Town Hall