

# Wargrave Local History Society

## Latest News - November 2007

### Wokingham's Town Halls

Trevor Ottlewski give an interesting illustrated history of the Wokingham's Town Halls to the November meeting of the Wargrave Local History Society.

Trevor explained that the present decorative town hall in Wokingham Market Place was not the first, but at least the second, to stand on the site. The earliest mention of it is in 1583, when Elizabeth I confirmed the right to hold a market 'by the clock house in the market place', whilst repairs to the building 'recently built' were detailed in 1590. It seems likely, therefore, that the structure dated from about 1580. An ordnance map of 1607 shows a building standing in the triangular Market Place - the map also shows that at the time Wokingham was the largest town in Windsor Forest apart from Windsor itself.

A notable sport at this time was bull baiting. Mr Staverton left a bequest to provide a bull for a charity event on 21st December each year in the market place, with prizes for the winning dog owner, and a collar for the dog. After the event, the bull was slaughtered, the hide and offal sold, and the proceeds used to provide footwear for the poor, and the meat given to feed them. This continued until 1821, after which the bull was just paraded in the town, before slaughter - a practice that died out during WW I.

The old Market Place building of 2 gables had a canopy to shield trader's stalls, but was otherwise completely open below. A view from 1780 shows it to have a pair of chimneys, as well as a towers, with old leaded windows, although on one side of the building these had been replaced by early sash windows. The end wall had a clock with a single hand. The covered market below had a boarded floor and tables for the merchants, whilst in one corner was a pair of stocks, a whipping post and two cells (ie a lockup). Upstairs there was space for a court room, and one for council meetings, whilst one of the local bye laws said that fire hooks and ladders for fire fighting were to be stored there. Until recent times, all of these facilities have remained at that site.

Most references to the building at that time were to its poor state of repair - as virtually nothing had been spent on its maintenance. Eventually, the landlord of the 'Bush' public house nearby took a 20 year lease to use it for entertainments etc - on condition that he repair the fireplaces, stairs, allow the council to meet there, and retain the portrait of Archbishop William Laud. By 1818 it again in need of 'overhaul', and a lot of money was spent to 'Georgianise' it, with sash windows, a newer clock in the tower, etc, retaining the market and lock up below. By 1830, railings had been added around the market area.

With the coming of the railway in 1849, the town began to expand. An Act of Parliament also decreed that towns have their own police station, and so in 1858 it was decided to demolish the building and build a new one on the site. Designed by Poulton and Woodman - architects more noted for ecclesiastical buildings - the new town hall opened in 1860. A grant of £2000 paid for the police station, and a further £1600 was raised by local subscription. Inside was a court room, police station, 3 prison cells and exercise yard, a covered market area, fire fighting facilities, council offices, a lending library, and a bank would also visit there.

A drinking fountain was provided in 1881, which still survives, although not in its original position. Notable in views from the first half of the 20th century was the absence not only of traffic, but also of 'street clutter'.

The present building was made of local bricks, with ironwork, such as the many decorative brackets, by

Wilders of Reading. The roof ridge tiles resemble a sawblade, and the ornamental stonework features oakleaves, acorns and hops - local 'symbols'. Inside, the building - now Grade 2\* listed - are the Mayor's Parlour, council offices, meeting rooms and the information centre. There are now only 2 of the original 3 cells, there, but the building does hold the 'town silver', portraits of (most of) the town mayors, and a war memorial, and boards listing the Freemen of the town and the Borough Mayors. Trevor's pictures showed us many of the details, both of the building and its contents.

The Town Hall was the focus for many public events, be it the visit of Queen Victoria in 1845, the 1919 Peace Day celebrations, or the proclamation of election results - from the balcony at one end of the building.

Trevor ended his presentation with a selection of views of Wokingham taken from the top of the building.

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