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Exploring the Market Place: past and present

Heritage Open Days
Organised by Salisbury Civic Society

Guildhall

Market Square

A Guildhall has existed on the Market Place since medieval times. The original was built by Bishop Simon of Ghent in 1314. Here, the Bishop exercised feudal rights over the city, agreeing (or not) to the local Council's demands, and dispensing justice over the City's population.

A new Council house was built in 1585 close to the Guildhall replacing an earlier one by the Cheesemarket. Speed's 1610 map reveals this Council House as a two storey structure with the council chambers upstairs and the ground floor left open, later enclosed.

A celebratory mayoral banquet in the Council House in 1780 was followed by a devastating fire that largely destroyed it. The Bishop agreed to the demolition of the now, very dilapidated, Bishop's Guildhall and the erection on the site of a new building that combined the functions of both.

The second Earl of Radnor offered to finance the new building if it was built to his plan and in centre of the Market place. The Council, while grateful for his generosity, wanted the new building elsewhere.   A compromise was reached and the Council building erected on the site of the old Bishop's Guildhall, with Radnor's financial backing. William Hussey (MP for Salisbury) donated £1000 for the furnishing of the Great Room. The foundation stone was laid in 1788 and the new building was finished by 1794. It was a single storey building with the centre recessed behind Roman Doric colonnades. The building was enlarged in 1829 with the front loggia replaced by a portico projecting forward with a room above for the Grand Jury. In 1889 a portico on the west side was demolished and rooms for the law courts erected. The building catered for the Council with a meeting chamber, banqueting hall and mayor's parlour, and the Law with courts, cells and other legal paraphernalia.

In 1927 the council moved its offices up to St Edmunds and the old council building was called, briefly, the Town Hall, before being renamed as the Guildhall. Of particular note within the stone dressed brick walls and slate covered roof of the building, is the early chimney piece recovered from the former Council House. Also of interest is the corridor of portraits of Mayors of Salisbury.

Major events were celebrated on the space around the Guildhall. For Queen Victoria's Jubilee in 1897, the Guildhall was decorated with red, white and blue ribbons twisted around the portico columns. Events were not restricted to royalty. In 1918 during War Bond week banners appeared on the building and a battle tank was parked outside, perhaps not surprising as during the early years of the century a 50 ft. wheeled ladder had been parked at the front of the building. It was too long to fit into the fire station!

Contribution to the war effort and the military was a continuing theme. For the inauguration of the war memorial in 1922 a military band and territorial army soldiers paraded outside the building, whilst during the second world war, the Guildhall had a dance troupe that performed most Saturday and Sunday evenings. Currently it hosts a variety of events as its website reveals.

Sadly, it is not possible to run tours of the Guildhall during the Heritage Open Days since the building has been taken over for funeral services while the crematorium roof is mended.

SALISBURY CIVIC SOCIETY