

A History of Lichfield's Guildhall

The Guildhall has been central to the government of the City for over 600 years, and in former times was not only the meeting place of the Corporation but also at various times the court, prison, police station, theatre, and fire station.

The first Guildhall was erected on this site about 1387, when Richard II granted ordinances to the Guild of St Mary and St John the Baptist, which had already been in existence for many years. Traces of the early Guildhall can still be seen in the courtyard at the rear of the building, but there have been many additions and alterations to the building over the years.

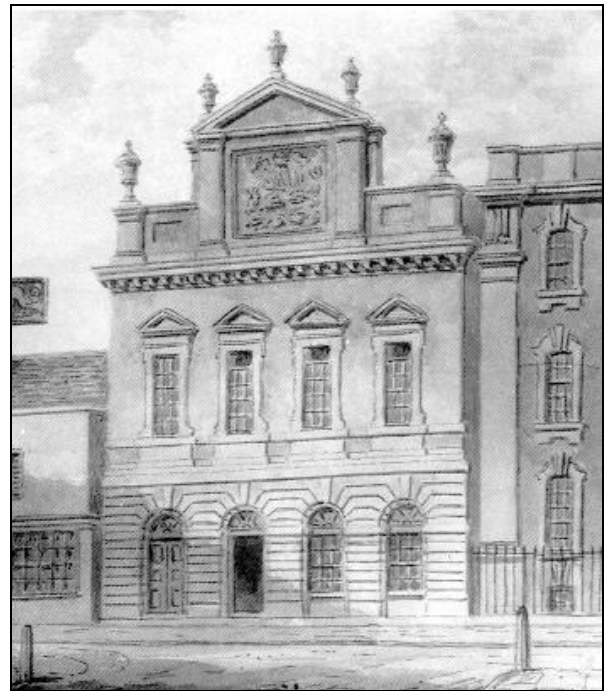
In 1707 the Conduit Lands Trustees made a contribution of £83 for "*plucking down and rebuilding the Townhall*" because it was "*so ruinous that it was in danger of falling down*". Further works took place in 1741 when Sir Lister Holt, the Member of Parliament for the City, gave £100 towards rebuilding, alterations, and additions. This coincides with a £50 grant from the Conduit Lands Trust in 1742 to "*complete the Townhall*". Most of the present ground floor layout, and the smaller rooms at first and second floor level date from this period.

Harwood's "History of Lichfield" describes the Guildhall in 1806 as

a spacious room, fronted with stone... Behind the Hall are small apartments, in which Members of the Corporation transact the business of the city. Underneath the Guildhall is the gaol for the confinement of felons and debtors.

By the 1840's however the Guildhall appears to have once more been in a ruinous condition, and in 1844 the Conduit Lands Trust agreed to provide £2,000 "*to put the Guildhall to rights once and for all*".

It is these works which created the Gothic style frontage to Bore Street, and the panelled main hall on the first floor. The architect was Joseph Potter of Pipe Hill, the



The Guildhall in 1838

builder was William Crompton of Lichfield, and the work was contracted to take place for £1,472 13s 2d.

Much more work was undertaken than originally planned, and the final account submitted to the Conduit Lands Trustees by the contractor totalled £2,578 3s 3¼d with a further £131 13s 8d paid on 1st March 1852 for the completion of the wainscoting in the main hall.

In 1909 the Council acquired the adjoining property, now known as Donegal House, for use as its offices. Plans to create a large new Council Chamber on the first floor of Donegal House were not proceeded with, and meetings continued to be held in Guildhall, with Donegal House used as offices. Connecting doors were made between the two properties at ground and first floor level.

Following various local government changes after 1974, Donegal House was owned by the District Council and the Guildhall was leased to the City Council. But in December 2012 the City Council bought the freehold to both buildings, so restoring them to the ownership and care of the City.



The Guildhall in 1897 – with banner for the diamond Jubilee of Queen Victoria

(The ground floor window was replaced with a door when that room became the fire station c.1904.)

1. Main Hall

The hall on the first floor is 87' (26m) long and 25' (7.5m) wide. It is wainscoted in oak, with a high pitched roof with hammer beams, giving a fine medieval appearance.

At the south end, the hall was permanently furnished for the Court of Quarter Sessions until December 1971, with a bench for the Recorder, the Mayor, Sheriff and Justices, a well of the court for barristers, and benches for the jury. The Recorder's bench and Jury benches remain

At the north end there is a large stained glass window which was originally in the north transept of Lichfield Cathedral, and shows patrons of the Cathedral. The Dean and Chapter offered it to the City Council in 1891 when the Cathedral wished to replace it with a lancet window.

After some opposition from a grandson of Dean Woodhouse, who objected to it being moved to a secular building, the window was



The Guildhall in 2012 – with banner for the diamond Jubilee of Queen Elizabeth II

installed in the Guildhall with the addition of a portrait of Queen Victoria, at a cost of £138.

The nine original panels comprise:

1. Oswy, King of Northumbria, who conquered the kingdom of Mercia in 656
2. Chad, first Bishop of Lichfield, 669.
3. Offa, King of Mercia, under whom Lichfield became an Archiepiscopal See in 786.
4. Stephen, King of England, 1135 -1154.
5. Roger de Clinton. Bishop 1129 - 1152.
6. Richard I, King of England 1189-1199.
7. John, King of England, 1199-1216.
8. Walter de Langton, Bishop 1296 -1321.
9. John Hacket, Bishop 1661 – 1670, who supervised the restoration of the Cathedral after the Civil War.

The oak board with names of Mayors and Sheriffs since 1836, was given by Alderman Joseph Bridgeman in 1927. He also gave the Royal Arms over the Recorder's seat. The office of Mayor was created under the Municipal Corporations Act of 1836, replacing the office of Senior Bailiff.

The office of Sheriff dates from 1553 when Queen Mary's Charter made Lichfield a County in its own right, separate from the rest of Staffordshire.

The fireplace bears the arms of Henry VII; a second fireplace was removed to make way for the communicating door to Donegal House.

The banners of the various old wards of the City were made by students of the Lichfield School of Art in 1975.

The Main Hall underwent significant renovation in 2020, including restoration of the oak panelling, floor to ceiling redecoration, improved lighting and a new oak floor.

The present Guildhall is used for City Council meetings and civic events, and is also widely hired out for wedding receptions, parties, concerts, meetings, etc.

2. The Moulton Room

At the rear of the main hall is the Moulton Room. The Council used to hold all its meetings here but it is now used only for committee meetings. Around the walls are photographs of Mayors and Sheriffs of the City since 1974. The room is named in honour of Christopher Moulton, Lichfield's 27th Town Clerk, who died suddenly and unexpectedly while in office in June 2017. Prior to this, it was known as 'Committee Room 1'.

3. The Ashmole Room

This room, built directly above the old cells, was formerly a Police parade room, then later used as a jury room. Part of the room was blocked off in the 1960's when the new Magistrates' Courts were built, and the room became virtually derelict. It was restored in 1989 and is now available for hire as a general meeting room.

The painting of Lichfield was presented by Thomas Adie, Mayor of Lichfield in 1856. It shows the city in the second half of the 17th Century, with the west gate of the Close

(taken down in 1800) and St Mary's with the steeple which was taken down in 1716.

4. Minstrels' Gallery

The Minstrels' Gallery on the second floor was fitted with oak panelling in 1937 and converted into a Muniment Room to display city documents. The room was refurbished in 1990 and reverted to its original name of 'Minstrels' Gallery'. The room was again refurbished in 2016 and became the 'Robing Room' for the city's civic representatives. It had been proposed that this room would be renamed after Christopher Moulton (rather than the Committee Room), as the renovation of this room was one of the last projects he oversaw.

Two other rooms on the second floor, are the "Whytmore Room" and "Stonyng Room", named after the Mayor and Sheriff of 1553 - the year that Lichfield became a "city and county" by Queen Mary's charter. These were the City Council offices until 2003. Nowadays, the Whytmore Room is used for meetings, and the Stonyng Room for storage.

5. Cells



The prison on the ground floor has been in existence since about 1545, and originally had 11 cells. These included two cells for debtors and a condemned cell in which prisoners were kept before execution. The last prisoners kept in the condemned cell were publicly hanged at the City Gallows at the junction of Tamworth Road and London Road in 1810.

However, Lichfield appears to have been a fairly law-abiding city for in a report made by the Corporation in 1823 it was stated that it would be a great hardship to the inhabitants to enlarge the prison and appoint a regular chaplain and surgeon as required by the Gaol Act, as, *"the average number of prisoners does not require the same, there being for some periods no prisoners in the gaol for months together."*

The cells contain a small exhibition for public view. The old oak chest formerly contained the City's charters and other important documents. It has six separate locks; each of the six aldermen had a key to one lock, so that all had to be present whenever the chest was opened.

6. Guildroom

In the early part of the 18th century the front part of the ground floor was let as a house. Later it became the living quarters for the Police Superintendent, and from 1889 to 1936 it was the caretaker's house. What is now the Guildroom was used as a fire station until 1943. This room housed two tenders which left through the double door at the front. Even in the 1930's only one tender had an engine; when the second tender was required it was towed to the scene of the fire by the breakdown truck from the local garage! The ground floor and Guildroom were refurbished in 1991 with panelled walls and a timber ceiling. The Guildroom is used as a general meeting room, with the smaller rooms adjoining used as a kitchen and caretaker's store.

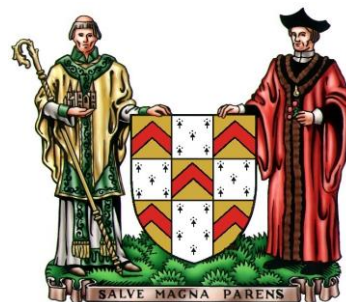
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Sword and Maces

Maces were authorised to be carried before the bailiffs by the Charter of 1662. The present maces date from 1664 (Charles II) and 1690 (William and Mary). The right to have a sword carried in procession dates from the Charter of 1686 and the sword was presented to the City in that year by the Recorder, Lord Dartmouth. The sword and maces are carried before the Mayor on all civic processions.

Armorial Bearings

The heraldic shield was in use by the late seventeenth century. Its heraldic description is 'Or, a cross square pierced ermine, five chevronells, gules'.



The Supporters on either side are a later addition, and a privilege granted by the College of Heralds only to royalty and very ancient families and corporations. On the dexter (right side, looking from behind) is St Chad, one of the patron saints of the Cathedral; on the sinister side is a robed master of St Mary's Guild.

The motto "Salve, magna parens", meaning 'Hail, great mother', is Samuel Johnson's greeting to Lichfield in his Dictionary, and is a tribute to Lichfield as both his native city and the mother of the Kingdom of Mercia.

City Seal

The right to use a common seal was granted by the Charter of 1548. The seal portrays three dismembered bodies, depicting the legend of a massacre of Christians at Lichfield during the Roman occupation. The seal, as remodelled in 1688, is still used by the Council today.

