

The first Council Meeting in the new Council Chamber, 1939.

The Guildhall, Cambridge

by

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The site of the present Guildhall has been connected with law and order since 1224 when King Henry III had the premises converted into a gaol.

In the old Butter Row, now occupied by part of the present Guildhall of Cambridge, there stood, in the early 13th century, a house owned by a man known to history only by the name of Benjamin the Jew. Adjoining it, or perhaps actually part of it, was a synagogue. In 1224, King Henry III

granted the property, at an annual rent of 6/8d., to the burgesses of Cambridge for conversion to a gaol. In the following year, the old synagogue became the home of the Franciscan Friars, then recently arrived in Cambridge. They remained there, in what must have been very cramped,

poor quarters, with the added disadvantage of having to share the same entrance door with the gaolers, for about 50 years, when they moved to the site now occupied by Sidney Sussex College. The building they vacated was then converted into a Town Hall or Guildhall, more commonly referred to as the Tolbooth, because its chief function was the collection of tolls levied on the goods sold in the nearby market.

In 1386 a new Tolbooth was begun, and was completed in the following year. It was built on arches, under which market stalls were erected, and consisted of a hall for meetings, a parlour for the Mayor and Aldermen, a Pantry in which the 24 Common Councillors met, and a kitchen. An outside staircase gave access to the rooms. The roof of the hall was supported by carved beams, one of which can be seen today in the Cambridge Folk Museum. The walls were hung with painted cloths, and Corpor-

ation records show that the floor was strewn with rushes.

The original two-storeyed house of Benjamin the Jew, although altered from time to time, remained part of the Tolbooth and continued to be used as a prison until 1790. To the north of it, at the market end of Peas Hill, was the Tanners' Hall where leather hides were sold until, in the 17th century, the building came into use as a house of correction for prisoners. In the same century the old Debtors' Hall, next to the Tanners' Hall, was converted for use as a gaoler's house, while the main part of the prison was temporarily partitioned off into two sections, one for the reception of ordinary felons, the other for that of persons accused of practising witchcraft.

Bad conditions

Conditions in the prison section of the Tolbooth were far from ideal. When John Howard, the 18th century gaol reformer, visited it he found that it consisted of an apartment, 21 feet long and 7 feet wide, known as "The Hole", in which hardened prisoners were confined; above it was "The Cage", in which debtors and criminals were huddled together. There was no exercise yard and no accessible water; the unpaid gaoler, however, was allowed to sell beer to the prisoners which, Howard reported, led to a good deal of drunkenness. The food was poor and was supplemented by that placed in the baskets which prisoners were allowed to hang out through the bars of the Cage to attract the charity of passers-by.

In 1747, the County authorities built a Shire House on part of the present-day Guildhall site. It fronted on to the Market Place and stood on land, leased by the Town, which had, for centuries, been occupied by permanent butchers' stalls or shambles. The building, like the old Tolbooth behind it, was erected on open arches and consisted of two Law Courts connected by a wooden bridge over Butter Row, where dairy produce was sold.

A few years later, in 1872, the old Tolbooth was replaced by a new Guildhall designed by the Cambridge architect, James Essex and costing £2,500, this sum being raised by public subscription and by the admission, at 30 guineas each, of a number of Honorary Freemen of the Borough. The exterior was not imposing, since

it lay hidden behind the Shire House, but the Assembly Room, which later became the Small Room of the Guildhall, was dignified and well-proportioned. The foundation stone, with its long Latin inscription, of the Essex building can be seen, today, on the first floor of the modern Guildhall.

The Shire Hall moved, in 1842, to Castle Hill, and the old building on Market Hill, the open arches below it having previously been filled in, was added to the Guildhall which thus consisted of the Assembly Room, the Aldermen's Parlour, the Common Councillors' Parlour and the Kitchen.

It was not long, however, before this Guildhall — or Town Hall as it was so often called in the 19th century — was proving itself far too small, and many attacks on its inadequacy were made in the local newspapers of the time. In 1858, for example, a report in the *Cambridge Chronicle* of a Bazaar held to raise funds for the Royal Albert Benevolent Society, opened with the words:

That wretched Town Hall! First and last, that was the cry. Long has it been a disgrace to Cambridge but never did it make one blush so much for the mean spirit of the town as during the present week. It was no mere work of amusement to which it was directed, but an effort of charity of which it was the scene. And charity has been baulked of its full function because Cambridge, with its wealth of Collegiate architecture, is content with a municipal building which makes us the butt and laughing stock of every

little trumpery borough in the kingdom.

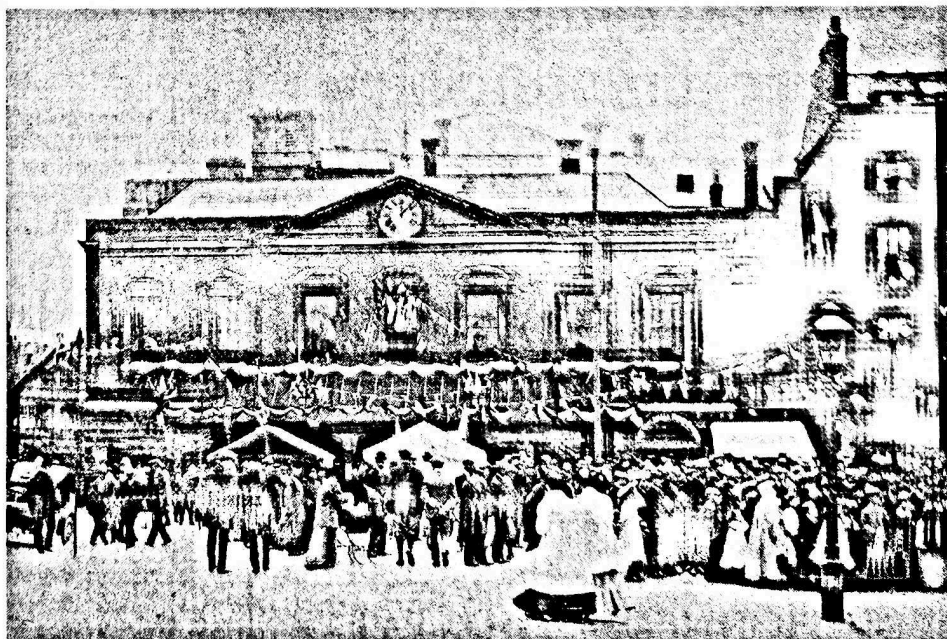
But additions were, eventually, made to the building and in May, 1862, a large Assembly Room, with the Public Library below, and a School of Art were opened. A local newspaper reporter could write, this time, that "it is a building of which our good old town may well be proud . . . it will stand in all its grandeur for many a century".

More departments were added later in the century, among them municipal offices and a police court, but by the 1920's, with Cambridge increasing considerably in size and population, the Guildhall buildings were, once again, proving themselves very inconvenient and far too small for the needs of the Borough Council and the local government staff. In 1932, therefore, it was decided to rebuild on the same site, now much enlarged by the purchase of certain old properties. The new building was, however, to retain certain portions of the old, notably the Small and Large Assembly Rooms and the Public Library.

Of the many architects' designs submitted to the Borough Council, that of Mr. C. Cowles-Voysey was finally selected. When the inhabitants of Cambridge saw it, a storm of controversy arose, far greater than that which has been engendered, in recent years, by the various proposals for the re-planning of the Lion Yard site.

The two greatest objections raised were to the design of the front of the

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The old Guildhall in 1907, showing the front of what was originally Shire House built in 1847. The passage on the right is the Old Butter Row.