

The Guildhall Project



An Appeal for the Guildhall, Bury St Edmunds

The Guildhall in Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk, is widely regarded as being England's oldest complete civic building. Built to act as a civic centre for the townspeople, the Guildhall has served as meeting place, storeroom, museum and library, as well as being the site of town celebrations and ceremonies. However, the building has been neglected in recent decades and today is rarely used. New plans are being developed that aim to return the Guildhall to civic and community use within the town. As a first stage in this development process it is proposed that the building be the subject of a thorough architectural and archaeological investigation. The results of this investigation will inform all future decision making processes regarding the future usage of this nationally important site.

Documentary History

The earliest written reference to the Guildhall dates back to 1279, when the Bury Chronicle records a visit to the building by Lords John of Cobham and Walter de Heliun. In addition, the street upon which it was built appears to have been known as Guildhall Street as far back as the 1290s. However, the evidence of the building itself would suggest that it was already over a century old by the time of John of Cobham and Walter de Heliun's visit. Recent examination of the rear of the building, where the original medieval stonework is still visible,



suggests that the majority of the existing building was actually constructed in the second half of the twelfth century. It is quite likely that the building was constructed as part of the medieval 'planned' town that was begun in the late eleventh century. Its positioning within the planned town is also highly significant. The main axis of the town was laid out along Churchgate street, which was probably far wider than it is today, and the Guildhall sat at the corner of Churchgate street and Guildhall Street.

Despite probably first being built at the expense of the wealthy Abbey of Saint Edmund, the Guildhall quickly came to be regarded as the civic centre of Bury St Edmunds. It was here that the town worthies met to discuss business, celebrate their successes and hold their feasts. However, it also soon became the focus for a centuries long dispute between the town and the Abbey. Throughout the middle ages the town was, in effect, ruled by the Abbey. As the town grew richer the townspeople

*Left: Detail of the King-post section of the 15th century roof.
Above: The 15th century porch with flushwork detailing.*

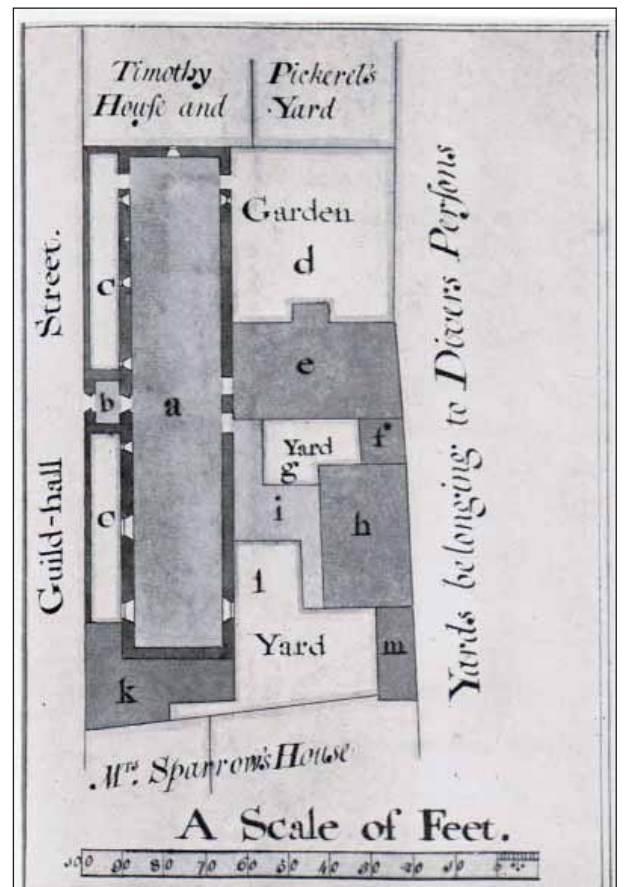
began a long struggle to gain independence for the borough. Inevitably, the Guildhall found itself in the frontline of such disputes. As early as 1327 it is recorded that the townsfolk went as far as imprisoning the Prior and several of the monks in the Guildhall itself. Despite such acts of revolt and insurrection the townsfolk did not actually achieve independence from the Abbey until the dissolution of the monasteries in the early sixteenth century. However, as the town grew richer the financial ties with the Abbey were weakened and the townsfolk found themselves in a position to remodel the Guildhall at their own expense.

The most obvious construction work to the Guildhall took place in the late fifteenth century. It was at this point that the highly decorative porch was added to the front of the building and the regionally important King and Queen post roof was constructed over the main hall. Although the massive decorative timbers of the roof are now invisible behind later ceilings, it is clear that they were designed to be viewed and to impress. At the same time a new range of buildings were added to the rear of the Guildhall, and a detached kitchen was constructed that allowed extensive catering to take place for Guild feasts. Remnants of all these 'new' buildings are still evident in the historic fabric.

With the fall of the Abbey in the sixteenth century the Guildhall became the true focus for civic life within the borough, and remained as such until the late twentieth century. It was here that the town council met, where borough funds were stored and where the principle ceremonies of the town took place. In later years, after further superficial remodelling, the Guildhall acted as an Assembly house, Court Room, town library and, most recently, a second home to the nationally acclaimed Theatre Royal.

Previous Interventions

Despite its central position, both geographically and historically, within the town the Guildhall has been the subject of only minor interventions within recent history. As a result the archaeological potential of the site has already been widely recognised but opportunities for intervention and investigation have not been forthcoming. To date, since the end of the Second World War, only two small scale interventions have taken place within the curtilage of the Guildhall.



Above: Warren's plan of 1742. The smaller medieval lancet windows and northern cross-passage are clearly shown.

The most recent work was undertaken in 2008 as part of the recording and monitoring process of work undertaken at the front of the building to replace the existing storm drains. Although the work was entirely non-invasive a number of potentially significant features were identified. In particular, the work indicated that a medieval ground surface and well preserved archaeological levels were

Left: Detail of the 12th/13th century doorway now located within the 15th century porch.

identifiable a c.300mm below existing pavement level. A number of fragments of stratified medieval pottery were recovered and recorded.

Prior to the monitoring carried out in 2008 the most detailed previous work was undertaken in 2003 at the rear of the building. This work was undertaken by the Suffolk County Archaeological Service with the aim of recording some of the early building fabric still visible at the rear of the medieval hall. The rear walls of the Guildhall were recorded by part survey and photographs. As an extension of this work two test pits were excavated with the intention of examining the nature and depth of the original building footings. A test pit was excavated in each of the two rear courtyards at the base of the main wall. The trench in the north courtyard revealed that the original footings extended to approximately 400mm deep, whilst that in the south courtyard was recorded as being in excess of 650mm deep.

During the excavation of the two test pits a number of well preserved archaeological levels were identified, thought to be buried top-soils, from which were recovered fragments of medieval and Late medieval pottery. In addition, the trench in the southern courtyard produced a single fragment of hand-made Saxon pottery which may indicate the presence of an early settlement within the area.

Project Outline

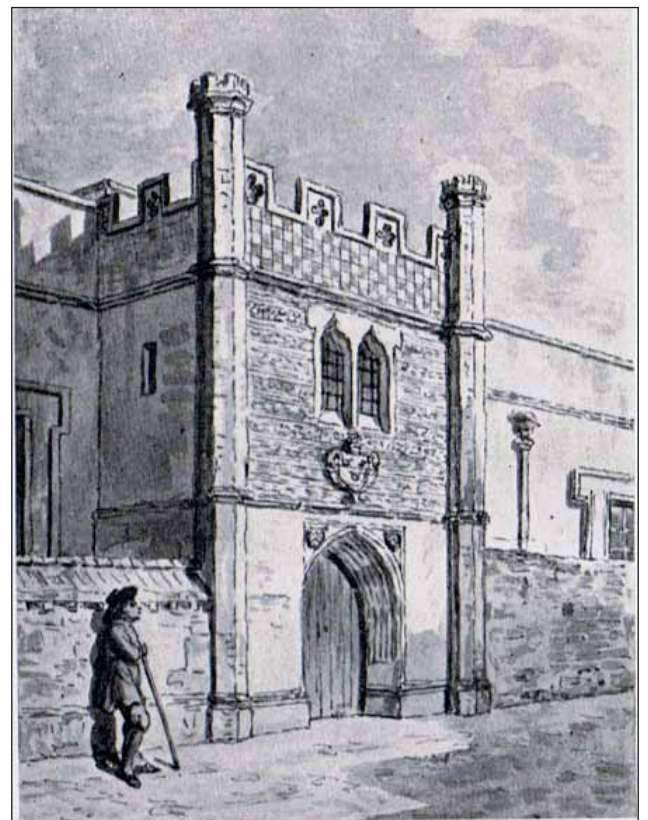
It is proposed that, after a number of decades of limited public access, that the Guildhall be returned to full public use within the borough and surrounding area. At present the recommendations are that the building should fulfil a dual function as Heritage Centre and Community Exhibition Space. It is one of the key ambitions of the Guildhall Project to return this important historic building to the centre of civic life within Bury St Edmunds. However, the projected future uses for the building are reliant upon the creation of a sustainable development plan that works to complement the existing historic fabric. At the present time understanding of the building, from both an archaeological and architectural perspective, is limited by the lack of documented survey work. As a result it is intended to undertake a number of multi-disciplinary surveys that will generate the information that will inform all future developmental decisions.

This project aims to carry out a full survey of the building, incorporating areas of the curtilage, using a variety of archaeological survey techniques. This will include non-invasive geophysical surveys of the two rear courtyards, physical and digital recording of the building fabric, scale drawings and digital recording of the roof structure and recording and analysis of the individual developmental phases.

Methodologies – Geophysical Survey

The geophysical survey will entail surveying an area of approximately 200m² using a system of Ground Penetrating Radar (GPR). Data will be collected across a regular survey grid at a station spacing of two centimetres and a profile spacing of 0.5 metres. These survey parameters accord with the guidance supplied by English Heritage in “Geophysical Survey in Archaeological Field Evaluation” (2008 Edition).

The survey grid will be tied in to an Ordnance Survey or measured base plan to facilitate the relocation of any interpreted survey features. It is anticipated that a 500 MHz centre frequency antenna will be used for this survey to optimise spatial resolution (at the expense of some depth penetration). However, previous interventions have suggested that intact medieval surfaces are located between 400mm and



Right: Engraving of the Guildhall porch from 1786 clearly showing the earlier precinct wall.

650mm below the current ground surface, with natural undisturbed layers beneath this. It has therefore been suggested that the lack of depth penetration will be more than compensated for by an increase in resolution.

Recording and Archiving

The results of the individual surveys will be brought together to form a complete project archive that aims to create a definitive fabric and developmental survey for the structure. This will take the form of a written report accompanied by detailed interpretive media, digital files and scaled plans. Copies of the report will be lodged with the Borough Council, Suffolk Records Office, English Heritage and the Project stakeholders. Further digital copies of the report will be made publicly available via the Suffolk County Library Service and the Archaeological Data Service. The full archive of raw data and material will be retained by the project until such time as it is deemed appropriate to lodge it with the Suffolk Record Office.

A concise and accessible version of the report, accompanied by a summary of the documentary history of the building, will be produced and made available to the general public. It is hoped that this publication will help to raise the public profile of this historic building within the locality.

Public Involvement

Despite its historical significance, the Guildhall remains an enigmatic building for the local population. Its history and importance in the story of the development of the borough is little known. The Guildhall Project aims to involve the public in all levels of the decision making process. To this end it is intended to allow access to the building during the survey period and fully involve the local population in the process. Volunteers will be encouraged to take a physical role in the survey process and local schools will be included in a programme of education and outreach. This will include visits to the site during the survey process and their participation in a number of workshops and public events.

Projected Outcomes

Your contribution towards the archaeological surveying and recording of the Guildhall will help us understand a great deal more about this historic building. It will generate the information that will inform all subsequent development decisions, and help secure a site of national importance for future generations. It will ensure that the story of England's oldest complete civic building is at the forefront of the decision making process, and that its significance is fully understood by all those who have a stake in its future.

Costs

Geophysical survey work of the northern and central courtyards	£4260
Archaeological Interpretation	£2600
Building Fabric Survey	£3900
Digital Fabric Recording	£2100
Volunteer training workshops	£750
Outreach and Education	£1190
Archival Research/ Desk based assessment	£1800
Project Archive	£450
Archaeological test excavation and Recording	£1250
Publication/Documentation	£380
TOTAL	£18,680