

## The Guildhall, Beverley



### *The early Guild Hall*

In 1128 the Archbishop of York, who was the Lord of the Manor of Beverley, gave the town its first Charter and, amongst other privileges, the Charter gave the Burgesses of Beverley the right to have their own Hanshus or Guild Hall.

Although the site of the earliest Guild Hall is not known, by 1386 the Guilds had become quite important and wealthy, and were using a building in Walkergate. Later, in 1437 a local draper was persuaded to convert four shops in Saturday Market Place, possibly at first floor level, (where Michael Phillips and Market Cross News stand today) into a hall and two chambers. The 12 elected keepers (or Governors) of the town used this building continuously until 1501, and an annual rent of 20 shillings was paid.

In 1501 the opportunity arose for the Governors to acquire their own hall in Cross Garths (later Register Square) where a house on the site of the present Guildhall was purchased from Edward Mynskyp for £73. 6. 8d plus one of the Town's pastures, called Tunge, situated near to the Beck. The Council holds the deeds for this house back to 1320 when it was originally built.

The southern part of the house (now Council offices) was used as a sessions house and house of correction from 1611, and a Charity school was located here in the earlier 18<sup>th</sup> century. In the later 18<sup>th</sup> century this was also the borough prison and police station.

### *The portico*

Although many improvements were made to the interior in the 18<sup>th</sup> century the front of the building was not altered until 1832 when a large Doric portico in the Greek Revival style was added by Charles Mountain the younger. The 15<sup>th</sup> century stone arched entrance was sold by the Corporation, and can now be seen in the grounds of the Dominican Priory near to the Minster. Two of the pillars of the portico were temporarily taken down and the foundations made good in 1889.

### *The courtroom*

Although the Guildhall was repaired in 1730 because of its poor state, by 1756 the situation was so bad that the walls of the council chamber had to be lined with matting to keep out the damp. In 1762, therefore, a new council chamber designed by William Middleton was built for just over £373. This

new courtroom was used for the Quarter Sessions until 1810 when the county courts were moved to the Sessions House in New Walk. The magistrates' courts continued here until 1991.

The south wall of the chamber was built with round-headed windows and, to suggest symmetry, blind arches were set in the north wall.

Upon completion the Governors decided the Courtroom should be decorated, and engaged Guiseppe Cortese (a notable stuccoist who was originally from the Italian-speaking region of Switzerland and had settled in Yorkshire in the 1730s) to provide an ornamental ceiling in the Rococo style.



Cortese was originally commissioned only for the central figure of Justice (which, unusually, is not blindfolded), the Town's Arms (on the east wall) and the King's Arms (on the west wall) for the sum of 40 guineas. Subsequently the Corporation also agreed to "two large Additional Ornamental panels" for a further £5, but in addition Cortese took it upon himself to supplement the decoration with "superfluous Work done in the Cove", for which it is hoped he was paid the requested sum of 5 guineas.

### Some interesting features in the courtroom



The Town's Badge depicts a beaver above blue and white lines, representing the beaver's natural habitat, and referring to the origins of the town's name, believed to be Beverlac or 'Beaver Lake'.

Over the dais is the Coat of Arms of King George III who was on the throne in 1762. The design shows the three lions of England and the red lion of Scotland, the three Fleur de Lys of France in the top right quarter and the harp of Ireland in the lower left-hand quarter. The coat of arms of the House of Hanover is in the lower right-hand quarter of the design. Around the coat of arms are the words "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*" which is the motto of the Order of the Garter, and this can be seen as a buckle at the bottom of the Coat of Arms.



The chairs in the courtroom are in the Chippendale style and were commissioned by the Governors in 1764. In 1827 a public gallery was created by removing the east wall, and two classical columns that had been removed from the Minster in 1826.



Repair work carried out in 1981 revealed a 15<sup>th</sup> century timber framed wall. This can be seen at the back of the public gallery and also in the kitchen upstairs.

### The Magistrates' Room

This room, built at the same time as the Courtroom in 1762, was originally the Council Chamber. The old furniture is made of oak and was part of the original council furniture dated 1604. The Mayor, Deputy Mayor and Clerk of the Chamber would occupy the three-seated bench situated under the windows, and the large table is thought to have been used to keep all the rents and monies received by the Governors. The other benches would have accommodated some of the Governors at their

meetings. The pewter displayed in the wall cabinets is part of a dinner service made in London c.1725, and was used whenever the Mayor entertained. It was traditional for the Mayor to give a dinner for the other Governors twice a year, and they were also expected to entertain the Archbishop and the High Court Judges whenever they came to Beverley.



## **The Parlour**

The Parlour was built around 1832, when many of the other alterations were being made by Charles Mountain the Younger, and was used as a Council Chamber until 1896 when the Courtroom was adapted in order that the public could attend the Council meetings.



This is an elegant room which houses a small collection of paintings by the Beverley born artist Fred Elwell and his wife Mary Dawson Elwell.

A collection of civic silver donated to the Corporation over the years can be seen in the cabinets. The silver collection includes three silver-gilt ceremonial chains that were originally worn by the town Waits ('Mayor's Minstrels), on display in the Community Museum. The Beverley waits

were members of the Guild of Minstrels who wore these chains on "high days and holy days". Two of the chains date from 1423, and are among the oldest surviving waits' chains in the country.

The wooden dresser houses a further collection of pewter plates belonging to the dinner service seen in the Magistrates' Room.

## **The stairway**

On the wall facing the Parlour is a board containing the names of the Mayors of Beverley from 1573 (the date when Beverley was given Borough status) to present day. On the other wall is a further painting by Fred Elwell.

Just outside the Parlour is the former Beverley Borough Coat of Arms which was approved in 1974 by the College of Arms. This incorporates the Beverley Town Badge, and the Coat of Arms of Haltemprice Urban District Council and Beverley Rural District Council.

## **Information sources**

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# Beverley Guildhall: Guide to the building

