

THE BOOTH HALL, WESTGATE STREET, GLOUCESTER

by
Barbara Drake

During the week of 18th May, 1957, another link with Gloucester's past history was destroyed with the demolition of the Booth Hall Hotel in Westgate Street (1). Behind this old coaching inn stood a mediaeval great hall, which was Gloucester's mediaeval Guild Hall or 'Exchange'.

The term 'Boothall' (Bohalla) denotes a covered place or market hall for the sale of wares and provisions. 'Guild Hall' (Gihalla) denotes a town hall where the borough courts were held and municipal business transacted. It was used by both the guild merchants and the community (2).

Merchant guilds were chartered 'Chambers of Commerce' with certain legal powers, and came into being with the Norman conquest. By the end of the 12th century some 28 of these trading associations were in existence. Possibly the Merchant Guild in Gloucester was amongst the most ancient, as it already had its Guild Hall in 1195: "The Burgesses (of Gloucester) purchased leave to buy and sell in their Guildhall, for which they paid ccc lampreys for royal protection" (3). (Dover had one in the 10th century, and Beverley (Yorkshire) the 11th century). In 1200, Gloucester had acquired sufficient standing to be granted a common seal for the common business of the town: "The seal of the Burgesses of the Gild Merchant of Gloucester".

The primary aim of the Guild was to promote the trading interests of its members and to exclude strangers from a share in the benefits that Guild association gave. Members were exempt from payment of tolls or dues on any goods bought or sold within the town. All trading within their Guildhall was carefully regulated, prices were controlled, and the King's weights and measures were used as being correct. As a result, they monopolised all trade in town, making it impossible to prosper in any trade by remaining outside the Guild.

The two bodies, the Burgesses of the town and the brethren of the Guild, who were after all very largely the same people, associated mutually. Under their chief officers, known as Aldermen, the Guild helped towns to draw nearer the concept of a Corporation during the 12th century. The Guild generally came to be associated with the governing body of the Town.

Henry II was aware that there were associations or Guilds forming naturally in many towns without royal consent and therefore making no annual payment for the privilege to him. Feeling deprived of his rights, he made a special effort to trace all unlicensed associations and fined them (4). In Gloucester we find in 1170 Ailwin the mercer being fined £100 for setting up a community in the borough of Gloucester, Henry Hund 20 marks and other citizens 17 marks each (5).

There was one occasion when traders could sell their wares other than in the Boothall, and this was the time of the Great Summer Fair, June 25/29th. It was granted to the burgesses of Gloucester by Edward I towards the end of the 13th century. Lasting the week, it was held in Westgate Street (6).

Here in Gloucester we find the Guild Hall and Boothall under the same roof, and from 1230 regular entries occur in the Corporation records of leases and grants of land in which they are mentioned, either as the 'Boothall' or 'Common Hall'. In 1230 there was a demise from Richard the Red, Richard the Burgess, David Duning, John the Draper, John of the Gooseditch, and all the other Burgesses of Gloucester of the Guild Merchant to Master Hugh the farrier of a part of their land of the Gihalla lying between the land that belonged to Ralph of Tudenham and the door of the Boothall (7). This parcel

of land realised 4s. annual rent to St. Bartholomew's Hospital for the 'sustentation of the infirm' from 1270 (8).

The 1455 Rental of the Borough of Gloucester (p.47) states: "The Community of Gloucester, by their Stewards, hold a tenement with appurtenances called 'the Bothall' or 'Gild Hall' for holding the pleas of our Lord the King and of others there; and there is an inn, which Philip Fleet, draper, holds there by deed, for which tenement called 'the Bothall' they rendered in the times of Kings Henry III and Edward I, 31½d; and in the time of Edward the Second for the said Inn thereof and for the workshop of the cellar, with appurtenances then adjoined, formerly belonging to Hugh the Farrier, which used to be collected by itself 10d. for enlarging the same, and for having the shop that Thomas Fleet, son of Philip, holds near there: and to this time they pay 3s. 7½d. (for landgavel)..

In Richard II's Charter of 1397/8, he granted to the Burgesses of Gloucester the power to deal with pleas relating to land or tenements within the Town, also debts, trespass and personal pleas at the Borough Court to be held in their Gildhall (9).

In 1499 it was decreed that any cloth, woollen, or linen brought to the town could only be sold within the Boothall. A fine of 6s. 8d. was imposed on anyone acting contrary to this Act for every piece so bought by them. This was reinforced in 1514: 'No stranger or foreigner to open their packs to sell in their houses but only at the Boothall. And no wool, woollencloth, lyncloth or other merchandise to be bought other than at the Boothall'. By 1527 the weighbeam at the Boothall was the only place for the weighing of wool, 1d. duty being levied on every 'tod' (28 lbs.) or 'wey' (14 stone) of wool. A fine of 8d. was imposed on anyone found weighing in their own homes. The Chamberlain gave merchants who traded according to these Acts tokens whereby they were able to redeem their pledges from the porters on the gates (10).

In 1528 the Boothall was rebuilt. In the Council Memoranda Book (GBR B2/1) there is an entry stating that the House of Justice (Assize Courts) is in such disrepair it is no longer fit to be used. King Henry VIII had a letter sent to the Constable of the Castle in which he said that the Courts were in "extreme ruin" and that he gave the mayor permission to use such stone as was necessary from the Castle - leaving sufficient for repair of the County Gaol. This was despite the fact that in 1493/4 the sum of 4s. 8d. was spent on a boat load of stone, bought at the quay, for paving the Great Hall (11). £80 from the bequest of Thomas a Gloucester was to be spent on the rebuilding of the Boothall.

An almost unique incident in ancient judicial history occurred at the Boothall when Anne, Lady Berkeley, sat as a judge under a special commission of Henry VIII. She impanelled a jury, received evidence, found Sir Nicholas Poyntz and Sir Maurice Berkeley and their fellows guilty of divers riots and disorders, and fined them (13).

In 1548 (GBR B2/1 f.46) Burgesses found guilty of offences were confined in the Boothall until they had paid the fines imposed; other townspeople were sent to the Northgate.

In the 1552 city rental, James Webbe was in possession of the Boothall Inn and the tenement on the east, the weigh beam and custom toll at the quay, for £6 13s. 4d. By 1558 (GBR B2/2 f.114) Robert Ingram of the City of Gloucester, innholder, and his wife Edith were leasing 'all that Inn or great tenement', the great hall, or Common Hall of which was used by the Corporation, where the Assizes and other meetings for the city and county of Gloucester were usually held, and the Election Chamber. The tenant had to allow J.P's and Sheriffs free access to the chambers, and to provide at his own expense on the day of the election of officers, cake, wine and ale.

From 1559 there is evidence that the Boothall was being used as a theatre. In the Chamberlain's accounts are many entries relating to the construction of a scaffold on which travelling players could perform. John Battie, carpenter, received 8s. for 108 quarters of 'elme bourdes' for the scaffold, 2s. for a piece of timber to place under it, 7d. for 100 'bordenayles', and 4d. for the actual construction. The players would receive about 10s. for their performances, plus a banquet given in their honour. They included the Queen Majesties' players, Lord Ambrose Dudley's, the Earl of Warwick's, the Earl of Worcester's, the Earl of Leicester's, the Earl of Sussex', and the Lieutenant of the Tower's players. There are also references to performing bears, wine or ale being supplied for the 'bearwards'. Ingram was paid 3d. for 1lb of candles at one performance (14).

By 1580 there seems to have been an extensive restoration and enlargement to the Boothall, with 4s. additional rent on the rebuilding of the stables. In 1592/3 amongst other works done, a filthy well in the stables was cleansed, and 2 cagements in the Election Chamber were installed. £34.10s. 0d. was paid out in 1593, including 5s. 4d. spent on 800 Cornish tiles (16).

About 1567, Robert Ingram died and his son, Robert, took over the lease on the Boothall (GBR B2/2 f.138) with usual conditions that the Great Hall and little hall commonly called Shire Court Hall and Election Chamber to be freely accessible. The Corporation were to be allowed access and use of a room at the head of the stairs going into the Election Chamber, for City business. In 1606 the Inn was held by a Mr. Lawrence Wiltshire. At this time the Boothall was rebuilt - made more spacious and convenient for the Justices of Assizes and J.P.'s. Two Assize courts were made. (GBR B3/1 f.220). In the London Illustrated News, 23rd January, 1847, is a sketch showing the lath and plaster building that was 'full of windows'. Fosbrook describes the inside as "barnlike and uncomfortable". The interior was one large hall supported by 2 ranges of timber pillars, probably chestnut (17), having at one side a gallery and (by 1847) some remnants of hangings (18). Clarke, in his Architectural History of Gloucester suggests that in its perfect state it was a spacious and lofty room.

References in the Corporation minutes show that the Boothall was still being used as a prison for offending Burgesses in the time of James I (GBR B3/1) and in 1659 (GBR B3/3 f.103), the stewards were ordered to "raise the bar at the Boothall for the safe keeping of prisoners". One incident illustrates the kind of misdemeanour that could end with imprisonment. Alderman Smith called Sheriff Robinson a "sawcie fellow and a baggage fellow", and was commanded to the Boothall to await the Mayor's pleasure (19).

When Mr. Lawrence Wiltshire died in 1612 the lease was taken by Mr. Jesse Whittingham, at £64 annually. The Boothall was held by his widow, Elizabeth Whittingham from 1647 at a rent of £50 a year (20). This lease passed on to a Mr. John Smallwood, but by 1700, he was so in arrears in rent, had neglected necessary repairs of the premises, and was in 'mean circumstances', so that proposals for a new lease were put before the Council. A man of 'substantial' means, Mr. Thomas Ady, had offered to buy the lease, and to lay out £50 in repairs (21).

From Thomas Ady's leases (GBR 1409/1523 & 1411/1525) more information relating to the interior of the Boothall can be noted. It describes the Election Hall as being over the Great Hall, with the Gallery leading to it, and 2 chamber reserved for the jurors situated to east and west of the gallery. Included is an inventory of furnishings: in the Election Chamber, 'One long table, one elbow chair and 4 long forms'; in the City Grand Jury Chamber, 'One oval table and 2 formes'. The weigh beam, consisting of 3 iron cranes, beams and wooden scales, were still in use for the trade of cloth, wool, leather, lead, iron and tin. Cattle were impounded in the Boothall yard for the required time taken

to settle trespass or debt offences. There was a yearly rent payable for use of water coming from Robins Wood Hill.

In 1701, Ady was given leave to erect a staircase at the north end of the premises leading to the Election Chamber. In 1716 £30 was given by the Corporation towards making the Crown Court at the Boothall more convenient, the county having to make up the remaining sum (22).

Rowland Pytt, woollen draper, took over the lease from 1714. In 1721 a proposal was put before the Corporation that £10 be spent towards making a Court of Nisi Prius. (GBR B3/9 f.117). From that time, "the criminal and nisi prius courts were divided by a thin partition against which the judges sat back to back, and it happened that the silence of one court, hushed while the judge was passing sentence of death on some poor wretch for robbery, or sheep-stealing has been broken by the roar of laughter from the other court, provoked by some sally of counsel, or an incident of a funny case" (23). The inventory for 1739 included 'irons for branding criminals'.

On the 14th/15th April, 1739, George Whitefield preached at the Boothall in a great campaign of religious 'revival'. He claimed an attendance of "near 5000 people". Though that number could by no means have been in the Great Hall, such were Whitefield's powers of oratory, those standing out in the yard could easily hear (24).

In 1741/3 the Boothall was repaired and rebuilt, the Corporation footing the bill. (GBR B3/9 f.464). At this time the lease changed hands, to Mr. William Rayer, of the city of Gloucester, innholder. By the time carpenter Roberts, bricklayer Ingly, pargeter Randall, glazier Wellavize, plumber Powell, ironmonger Coles (who incidentally in c.1750 owned with Robert Raikes some Welsh tin works in the Neath Valley, and whose daughter married Rowland Pytt (25)) had been paid, £595 had been spent on the rebuilding. The frontage of the Booth Hall Hotel that remained a feature in Westgate Street until 1957 was added at this time, complete with armorial bearings, the work of a well-known sculptor, Thomas Ricketts, erected in the portico for which he was paid £12 8s. 0d. The group was composed of the City coat-of-arms, a boy on a lion, and a boy on a unicorn, carved in either Cotswold or Bath stone. When the Boothall was demolished, this group was renovated, repainted and placed in the gable end of the block of shops on the north side of Westgate Street at the junction with Three Cocks Lane (26).

The Gloucester Journal, 27th July, 1742, carried the following notice: "William Rayer is removed from the 3 Cocks in the City of Gloucester to the Boothall Inn... being now new built and made very commodious for the reception of Gentlemen and Travellers who may depend upon meeting with good entertainment and civil usage. N.B. The wool market and stamping of Leather are kept in the Hall". It had become a busy coaching Inn, with stabling. For 40 years it was leased to William Rayer, at a rent of £40 p.a., one of the leading hotels in Gloucester. Royalty does not appear to have stayed there, however (27).

The Gloucester Journal, 21st July, 1761, had the following item of news: 'Monday a.m. 2 o'clock. About 2 hours ago a Fire broke out at the Boothall in this City. It began at the Crown Bar; the west corner of the House is nearly consumed. The Engines are all playing and we hope it will be extinguished before it reaches the adjacent houses. 5 o'clock. The Fire is entirely suppressed, and the Damage sustained is not very considerable. The Grand Jury Room and the upper end of the Hall are the only parts that have suffered and none of the adjacent houses are hurt, nor do we hear that any Accident has happened. The Assiduity of the Magistrates and the Courage & Alacrity of the Workmen cannot be too highly commended.' The Corporation had to meet the expenses of rebuilding the south end of the Boothall, a sum of £189. It was decided to rebuild in brick only. (GBR B3/11 f.20)

"On the night of March 7th, 1769, the Boothall was so crowded with members of 'The Histrionic and Musical Academy for the Improvement of Learning and Literature', that there was scarce room for the players to come upon the stage. Suddenly someone in the pit heard a board crack and called out, "The gallery is coming down". Others in fright called out, "Fire, fire", which threw the whole gallery into confusion and many who were in the front jumped down into the pit. The number of people pressing to get down the stairs also broke the rail, and the confusion existed for 10 minutes until the audience could be convinced that the danger existed only in their imagination." (The Citizen, 18th March, 1952). At this time Oratorios were in vogue, and sacred dramas such as 'Joshua', 'Israel in Egypt', 'Judas Maccabaeus' were being performed at the Boothall (28).

Rayer was in occupation of the Boothall until 1781, to be followed by George Hinks, at £105 rack rent; 1796 to 1829 saw John Spencer at £110 and later £150. During this period £327 was paid by the Corporation for entertaining the Gloucester Infantry; £1000 was spent on the erection of the Shire Hall Courts (the famous Polygonal Courtrooms designed by Robert Smirke); and a further £234 spent on repairs and improvements. In 1803 Sir George Onesiphorous Paul had delivered an address at the General meeting of the County of Gloucestershire with regard to considering the necessity or expediency of erecting a new Shire Hall or adapting such measures as the delapidated state of the Boothall might require (29).

"After the erection of the present Assize Courts, the Boothall was converted into a hay-loft and coach shed, but becoming too dilapidated even for these base uses, the Corporation pulled it down a few years since, and built a commodious Club room on the site of it." (Gloucester Journal, 2nd February, 1861.)

"Adieu, thou dreary pile! old Sessions Hall!
Where for so many hundred years
Blind Justice, with her well wigged ears,
Has heard the dronings of the legal drawl,
Besides that ancient range of stable
Whence all the sounds of pristine Babel
Brought their wild notes to swell the suitor's din,
And horses neighed without, and asses brayed within..."

Horace Twiss, the wit and politician. (30).

Spencer advertised his retirement in the Gloucester Journal, 2nd June, 1827 calling the Boothall a 'well accustomed Inn & Coffee House.' He mentioned that 'coaches to & from all parts of England & Wales stop at the House, which is also a Sleeping House for passengers by coaches from London to Carmarthen & all parts of Wales.'

A plan of the Boothall drawn in 1826 shows the Hall measuring 163' x 50' (34).

John Rawlings answered the advertisement in 1828/9, to be followed in 1841 by R.W. Holtham at £105 rent, Fred Biscoe in 1860, and William Morris from 1862 to 1867 at £80 (31).

From the reports of the City Council meetings 1865-70 a picture emerges of a declining phase in the city. Difficulties arose over the Boothall tenancy on September 29th, 1866; Morris was insisting that before he signed the lease, the Corporation had to pay the insurance. He continued to refuse to pay it

himself so it was proposed that he should be given notice to quit the Boothall. He claimed that he had spent £300 on repairs to the property, but Alderman Riddiford pointed out that he had been paying half the former rent of £120 in order that money could be spent on substantial alterations and improvements. The Mayor suggested that such an unprofitable property ought to be sold off, and if Morris liked to buy it there would be no need for him to go at all. 'In reality the Corporation had laid out £200 seeing that they only received the miserable rent of £66.'

In 1867, there was talk of the School of Art and the Museum purchasing the property, but no further action was taken. Mr. Hawkins spoke strongly against the shutting up of the house as an Inn, saying that such a course of action would greatly injure the tradesmen of Westgate Street.

A report on the Boothall was made for the Corporation 1867: 'The buildings are very old, entailing a great expense despite £200 outlay within the last five years in repairs. The part used as a Dwelling House now requires extensive repairs or to be wholly rebuilt..... consequent upon the opening of the South Wales and other Railways on the western side of Gloucester, or from other causes, the Traders' business of the premises as an Inn has very much declined in common with that of other Hotels in the same locality, one of which has already been permanently closed (i.e. The King's Head Inn, opposite) and there is every reason to believe that Hotel property in that quarter will continue to decline it appears undesirable that Inn property should be held by the Municipal Corporation, the Mayor as well as other members of the Body being magistrate and cases relating to Inns frequently arising before the bench We propose that the property be offered for sale by auction, the sum of £1200 being fixed as reserve price, with liberty afterwards to sell by private contract at that price if not sold at the auction. On September 28th, 1867, permission was granted by Her Majesty's Treasury to sell the Boothall, but meanwhile, in the November, part of the premises were let to Ephraim Lloyd at £4 a month.

It was sold in August 1868 for £1500 to George Barrett, wine and spirits merchant, the highest bidder, complete with Club/Ballroom in rear, yard, stabling, coach houses, and a tenement in Upper Quay Lane to be used as a Tap (32). On Christmas Eve 1869 the Old Hall was opened once more, this time as the Alhambra Music Hall capable of holding 1500 people, equipped with a bar and promenade. It soon acquired a bad reputation and in 1874 it burnt down. (Gloucester Journal, 23.10.1948.) Barrett died on 15th February, 1882.

Thomas Maslen, licensed victualler, leased the Inn off Barrett's trustees, for £200 by quarterly payments, also the Skating Rink adjoining the Boothall, stables, loft over the coachhouse, and the yard situated at the rear. He could have purchased it for £4000. (DC/F 24) Maslen surrendered the premises back to the trustees in 1887, and it was sold for £2000 to Arnold & Co. Ltd. In 1916 it finally became the property of Arnold Perret & Co. Ltd. (The Cheltenham Original Brewery), until its demolition in 1957.

The Old Hall took various names in its final years:

1886 - Royal Albert Hall Palace of Varieties; 1889 - Royal Albert Theatre;
1902 - King's Theatre and Opera House; 1910 - King's Hall;
1918 - King's Hall Theatre; 1927 - King's Kinema;
1936 - King's Theatre Ltd; and finally just The Booth Hall Hotel, from 1939 (33).

The Citizen, 23.10.48 reported: "It stands now neglected, dusty and depressing....Today little is left of the old Assize Hall, save a small amount of timbering on the short side; and the front in Westgate Street with the pediment. The building is suffering a lingering death, but before it goes, steps could be taken to rescue those parts that are worthy of being retained and a photographic record made of those that are not." There are photographs at

the Gloucestershire Record Office taken prior to demolition (GPS 154/467/471)

The Citizen, 24.1.50, carried a further report: 'After recent discussions between the Council and the Cheltenham & Hereford Breweries Ltd., it was decided that on termination of the existing tenancy the building shall be demolished, and the site cleared ... It was compulsorily acquired by the Council some years ago when it was thought likely they would be able to extend the Shire Hall buildings in the near future..... now it is used by the County Council as a stores. Estimated restoration is in excess of £20,000 and the Brewery are not prepared to carry out any scheme for restoration unless the Council can grant a long lease, which it is unable to do, not knowing when they might need the site Mrs. Lucy Marmon had over 50 years association with the premises, from 1896, and recalls the day when there was a considerable number of stables attached to the house (now a stores) and the stabling of horses for dealers and other people coming into the market was the chief business.'

And so, about the 18th May, 1957, this site on which the Boothall had stood for at least 800 years, was lost to view under a later extended Shire Hall complex.

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