

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Public Buildings

Introduction

So far we have considered examples of private buildings, most used for domestic accommodation or (as in farm buildings) involved in the pursuance of a livelihood. We have also recorded a number of public buildings, including a town hall, two almshouses and a courthouse. It is to these that we now turn.

Town halls have been the subject of an interesting study by a Canadian historian, Robert Tittler (1991) which forms the basis for most of the following paragraphs. Tittler concludes that in early modern England no less than 202 town halls were constructed, converted or experienced a substantial rebuilding. In addition close to 150 other halls derive from the same era. He thinks that the town hall was destined to replace the guild chapel, the parish church and even the market place of the late Middle Ages, as a local point for social and civic life. He sees it as providing space for ritual and ceremony crucial to the social cohesion of the community.

On the basis that form follows function, he describes the architectural features of the town hall during this period. In exploring Rigold's analysis (Rigold 1968) he divides them into two broad categories, ground floor halls with a storied chamber at each end, and first floor halls with undercrofts and an external staircase. From the latter emerged the typical English town hall, largely carried on pillars (providing a covered market space) but with an internal staircase and a small store or lock up below. Sixteenth and 17th century town halls are usually located on a spacious island site for ease of access for marketing. Such were a number of Oxfordshire town halls

including the Tolsey, Burford (see below), those at Faringdon, Eynsham, the Guildhall at Chipping Norton, the town hall and market cross at Witney and that at Watlington. Most magnificent of all is the town hall, which became the county hall of Berkshire, at Abingdon until it was absorbed into Oxfordshire.

The characteristic form taken included a large room at first floor level, literally a hall used for the conduct of public business, assembly meetings, judicial proceedings, banquets and ceremonies. Below was an open ground floor, columned and paved and used for marketing. Other functions might include an armoury, a schoolroom, a storage space and a fire station, gaol or prison. This latter was small and largely a temporary holding area, connected to the business of the market.

Fig. 13.1 (left) Town Hall, Faringdon. Note the central position of this public building in this small market town. The assembly room occupies the first floor over the open-sided market place and square

Fig. 13.2 (right) Town Hall, Watlington, mid-17th century. Paid for by the Stonor family





Fig. 13.3 Guildhall, Chipping Norton, 15th century, facing the market place

Tittler (1991) makes a further point that as far as style was concerned, nearly all civic halls built during the period were characteristic of regional and traditional buildings of their district, with an emphasis on utility rather than theoretical aesthetic values or fashions. The materials employed were derived from the locality and produced a common and familiar building type. We will examine the one town hall which we have studied and see how far these generalisations apply. The Tolsey at Burford is situated at the junction of two market streets, namely the High Street and Sheep Street (see Figs 13.21 and 13.22). It is two storeyed with a columned open ground floor, within which a staircase at one end leads

Fig. 13.4 Terrace of almshouses, brick with stone dressings, Mapledurham



to a large upstairs room. This timber framed and rendered superstructure is on a stone base. Behind is a wing which seems to have had a lockup on the ground floor and a storage space on the first floor. It is a relatively unsophisticated building which fits seamlessly into the local scene with emphasis but without dominance. (Further consideration of the Tolsey may be seen below, pp. 388–9)

The cost of these urban town halls of the period 1560–1640 was born by the somewhat fragile finances of towns which might only have had a population of about 3000. The cost of such a building in Oxford, for example, was £200 in 1615–17, which included the construction of the council house, a court room, an audit room, a clerk's office and a cellar. This at a time when the average annual income of the town was only £100 or less. Given the prestige afforded the town by such a development, the Town Council was prepared to borrow and risk getting into financial difficulties.

The medieval hospital, unlike the modern institution was not a building primarily or specifically for the care of the sick, for the word hospital is derived from hospitality. The 'hospital' therefore had a wider remit which included the provision of hospitality for travellers, and frequently offered some form of charitable education. Moreover its function was seen primarily as ensuring the intercessionary prayers of the living for the dead, often directed as an elaborate memorial for the generosity of the founder. This function was lost with the Reformation. The treatment of the sick therefore became an alternative use for these charities, and ultimately swallowed them up in providing medical care for their communities.

Hospitals and almshouses proceeded through three main types of building during the medieval and early modern periods. All these are found in the Oxford region and two of them figure in our surveys. The dominant form in the Middle Ages was the infirmary hall, derived from monastic antecedents. Characteristically this consisted of a long hall, narrow in relation to its length, with or without aisles, terminating in, or, adjoined by a chapel. Rows of beds were provided lining the walls, men separated from women. The remains of such an infirmary hall were excavated at Magdalen College, on the site of the hospital of St John the Baptist. However, a recent resistivity survey has located a long hall-like structure in the middle of the college's great quadrangle which may have been the principal infirmary hall.

This was in a position often found in medieval hospitals, namely outside the city wall by one of the gates. Towards the end of the Middle Ages a greater desire for privacy explains the move to the courtyard plan with the provision of separate dwellings for the alms people. It is illustrated by the lavish foundation of school, schoolmaster's house and individual alms houses arranged around a cloistered quadrangle (see Fig. 13.5) by William de la Pole, Duke of Suffolk at Ewelme, Oxfordshire. Meals however continued to be eaten in common, and much of the almspeoples' day was taken up in religious services in the adjoining church, with an emphasis on prayers for their benefactor (Goodall 2001).

The move towards privacy in hospitals in late medieval England is found at Christ's Hospital Long Alley almshouses at Abingdon. Here again proximity to the parish church meant that religious services took up most of the alms person's day. Instead of the accommodation being grouped round a quadrangle as at Ewelme, the 13 houses (occupied by seven men and six women) were strung out in a long line, connected by an external pentice or cloister. This had three porches added in 1606–7 and the common hall was refurbished at the same time. By the 17th century a third type became common, the terrace. Here, seen in Studley and at Mapledurham is a long row of identical houses. There are no communal buildings and no chapel although at Mapledurham the parish church is nearby. The emphasis on religion declines and a wholly secular institution emerges.

Long Alley almshouses, Abingdon

The Fraternity of the Holy Cross was incorporated in 1441. This body had already held the Barbour almshouses and, in 1434, Sir John Golafre of Fyfield, conveyed to the Fraternity buildings and land which he owned at Abingdon, Sutton Courtenay, Hanney and Sutton Wick. The Fraternity conducted their business in the room which has separate access over the north porch of St Helen's church (Fig. 13.7). They also built a rood screen and a loft in the church and they erected a prominent cross in the market place. The fraternity built the Long Alley almshouses in 1446 and had founded the Burford Bridge in Abingdon. Substantial funds built up by these charities were confiscated in 1547 when their endowments became Crown property. At their



Fig. 13.5 Timber framed cloister. Gods House at Ewelme, 1436–1440



Fig. 13.6 Detail of a painting in the Hall of Long Alley almshouses showing the building of the Burford bridge in Abingdon. In addition to supporting the almshouses, the Fraternity of the Holy Cross, or Christ's Hospital as it became, financed bridge building and maintenance

dissolution the charity commissioners certified that the Guild and Fraternity had an income of £81 13s 10d a year – a very considerable sum. The Royal charter founding Christ's Hospital came in 1553 through the good offices of Sir John Mason, who became the first Master, and the influence of Roger Amyce who succeeded him in that post. Under the Charter the foundation evolved into an entirely secular institution with the Master and Governors continuing the tasks of running the almshouses of almsgiving, maintaining roads and bridges and aiding the grammar school.

Exterior

The first phase of the new almshouses was built in 1446 and consists of the west and east elevations and the gabled ends. The west elevation is built of limestone rubble but has been much altered by the addition of a central mullioned and transomed bay window, brick chimneys, and a tiled roof. The gable ends are stone built with mid-15th century single light cusped windows surviving in the south gable. Those in the north gable have been

renewed in the 20th century. The east elevation is much the finest and best preserved although the porch, cupola, and coved cornice are later. In cutting through the central doorway, which was inserted together with the porch, the arcading was sliced away at this point demonstrating that this arcading was originally continuous with doorways into the pentice at each end.

We think that the almshouses were divided into two in this way by the central hall to separate the seven men on one side from the six women at the other end. R. M. Clay (1909, 121) states that there were 13 men and women housed here but there are 14 dwellings, presumably one for the master..

Within these two passages and the pentice the fundamental timber frame structure of the building is visible, the masonry gables simply 'bracket' the carpentry rather as brick encloses much of the almshouses at Ewelme (Goodall 2001, 82). In examining the pentice we recorded that just one king mullion was more substantial than the others and that this was located just south

Clockwise from top left:

Fig. 13.7 Room above the church porch where the Fraternity of Holy Cross met. The door in the angle and the stair turret gave independent access to this meeting room



Fig. 13.8 The Long Alley almshouses of 1446 from the churchyard looking towards the early 17th century gabled porch to the central hall. The cupola over the hall may have succeeded a smoke louvre



Fig. 13.9 Pentice on east side of almshouses showing post to arch braced collar (marked by an arrow). It will be noted that this post is proud of the line of the window cill



Fig. 13.10 Detail of the central zone of the east side of the pentice. With the addition of the central porch and doorway the arcading was visibly cut away here

