

BASINGSTOKE'S TOWN HALL

An article written by John Oliver in 1983 for a Workers' Educational Association Class

That some form of Town Hall had existed in Basingstoke for many centuries is evident from references in the documents of the town. One of the earliest is of **The Constitutions ordained and composed in the common Mote Hall of Basingstoke** dated 1389.¹ Over the following years there are further mentions, using Motte Hall, Mote Hall, Market House and Town Hall, usually referring to its repair or even rebuilding, such as in 1657 following a disastrous fire the previous year.

The first time we get a representation of the Town Hall is on the **Survey of Basingstoke for the Duke of Bolton** in 1762², and this is only a thumbnail sketch.

A better view on a print of 1831 shows the building to be supported on columns with an open space beneath. It had large imposing windows and a tiled roof and was surmounted by a small domed tower which had a clock on at least two sides. This building was not on the site of the present Town Hall but on the west side of the Market Place, in front of what is now Lloyds Bank. Also to be seen in this print is the iron railing that was put up to enclose the area under the Town Hall in 1817 at the same time as it was paved, probably as a result of the Basingstoke Paving Act of 1814³.

The open space under the Town Hall was used by the market traders during the weekly Wednesday market and no doubt there was a lot of competition to get a pitch under cover rather than in the square. The Town Hall was used for functions such as meetings of the Town Council and the various courts. There was the Court Leet or Court of the Hundred of Basingstoke which had originally been held every third Saturday but, by the nineteenth century, was only being held to appoint the tithingmen, who were responsible for keeping the peace in their own manors. The Sessions of Peace were held twice yearly or quarterly when there were prisoners for trial. More frequent were the Petty Sessions which were held every Tuesday. From the windows of the Hall would be read official proclamations such as that for the coronation of George IV, recorded by Samuel Attwood in his diary for 7th July 1821⁴.

In addition to these serious meetings, suppers and balls were also held there. One was advertised in the *Reading Mercury*:

Penny's respects to the Nobility and Gentry begs leave to inform them there will be a BALL at the TOWN HALL on Thursday the 7th January, 1808.

On the evening of the last day of Basingstoke Races there would be a ball such as the one reported in the *Hampshire Chronicle* on 8th September 1828:

The ball on Friday evening, at the Town Hall numbered nearly 150 persons, including Lord & Lady Bolton, The Hon. Mr. Burrell, J. Portal, W. H. Thoyte, Thos. Smith. C. S. Lefevre Esqs. &c. &c., with their respective families. It was distinguished throughout by the polite attentions of the Steward, W. L.W. Chute, Esq. And terminated with much éclat about five o'clock this morning.

In his diary Samuel Attwood mentions other events taking place there, such as a supper for special constables and a lecture on geology. Several times he writes of band practice at the Town Hall and once specifically, on 23rd May 1819, 'Band Meeting at the Jury Room'.

We can therefore deduce that, besides the main hall, there was at least another room for use by the Juries. There was also a Council Chamber, although this could have been in the Mansion House. Some idea of the decorations and fittings can be learned from the Corporation Minutes of 1822 when it was 'resolved to repair and cover with scarlet cloth the door opening into the Town Hall and the door from the Town Hall into the Council chamber be altered to correspond and the ornaments of the

chandalier to be of the same color' and 'that the seats of the Town Hall be covered with scarlet Cloth'.⁵

In 1828 proposals were made for major changes to the Market Place, resulting in a Parliamentary Act which received the Royal Assent on 14th May 1829 (Act for enlarging the Market Place in the Town of Basingstoke, 1829).⁶ To enlarge the area, the Act provided for the purchase of properties on the north side of the square, in Wote Street and in Church Street. In the square were two properties described as 'dwelling house, shops, storerooms, buildings, yard and premises'. One of these was occupied by George Caston, the ironmonger, and the other by Hannah and Ann Willis and the mortgage had been transferred to the solicitors Cole, Lamb & Brooks. George Caston later moved across the square and his family name came to be used for the lane and alley which passed his shop and foundry. The third property facing the square to be purchased and demolished was the Royal Oak public house, leased from the Duke of Bolton by Thomas and Charles May but occupied by James Cooper. The owners of these properties were naturally keen to get the best price and did not readily agree to sell. It was not until July 1831 that the Corporation obtained possession of the site.

Three months after the public meeting to discuss enlarging the market we read in the Corporation minutes for 2nd January 1829, "Resolved that the sum of two thousand pounds be subscribed by the Corporation for a new Town Hall and Buildings". This new project was hampered by the delay in obtaining the properties to be demolished, because it was on the site of these that the new building was to be constructed.

Lewis William Wyatt (1777-1853) was the architect appointed to design and supervise the building. He was an eminent architect of the period but best known for his work on country houses. The only other public buildings attributed to him are Stockport and Winslade churches. Basingstoke Town Hall was probably his last work before he retired to the Isle of Wight.⁷ We can guess that he was recommended for the commission by Lord Bolton, because it is known that he remodelled Hackwood House, just outside the town, for the first and second Lords Bolton between 1807 and 1825. (His relations owned the manor of Weston Patrick, where Thomas Henry Wyatt rebuilt the church of St Lawrence and is probably portrayed on a corbel at the side of the north door.)

Building operations commenced in May and the first stone of the Town Hall was laid by the Mayor on 8th July with great ceremony. The building contractors were Messrs Howard and Dixon from London with a contract for £3,900. A payment of 19s 3d in the Chamberlain's accounts, on 15th October 1832, "Beer to workmen new Town Hall" was probably for the topping out when the highest point of the building was reached. On Wednesday, 17th April 1833 the last market under the old building was held; the next day this building was sold for its materials, which raised £139 19s 6d. Samuel Attwood mentions the first use of the new Town Hall as 16th April 1833 when the magistrates occupied the Justices' Room.

All this building and the enlarging of the market cost a great deal of money. Just to obtain the Act of Parliament cost £945, to purchase the properties, pay solicitors' and other fees, amounted to £4,527, the architect was paid £296 and the final building costs were £4,527. A total cost of £9,695.⁸ At one time there had been correspondence between the Corporation and Mr Wyatt to try and reduce the building cost to £3,000⁹ but, by borrowing, it was all achieved. This Town Hall is the one still standing, no longer used for its original purpose but housing the Willis Museum.

The Town Hall has been altered over the years. It had been designed, like its predecessor, to be open on the ground floor for use by the market traders; this was enclosed in 1865 to provide extra rooms. The clock tower on the roof was replaced in 1887 in celebration of Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee, although this had to be removed some years ago for safety reasons. The clock itself is to be seen in the Willis Museum.

On the first floor the large meeting room continued to be used for the courts, public meetings and entertainments. It provided a very suitable place for balls, such as one 'Grand Fancy Dress Ball' held

in January 1852, described in detail in the *Hampshire Chronicle* and also commented on by Samuel Attwood. There were 220 people who ‘assembled in every variety of costume, embodying the characters of our ancient kings, gay cavaliers, courtiers and soldiers with a pleasing admixture of foreign costumes.’ Meetings of the Mechanics Institute, which was founded in March 1841, were regularly held in the Town Hall until the opening of their own building in 1869 – the building which later housed the library and the Willis Museum until 1961. Their lectures were on such subjects as ‘The wonders of the electric telegraph’, ‘the music of animated nature’ and ‘Our ancient fatherland’.¹⁰ Besides all these varied activities, we find another use for the Town Hall in *Pigot’s Directory of Basingstoke* for 1844, which under Bankers lists ‘Savings Bank, Town Hall – (open every Wednesday from 11 till 12) – Joseph Shebbeare, actuary’. Mr Shebbeare was also the Town Clerk, clerk to the magistrates, and coroner.

The early nineteenth century was a time of change and reform. In the spirit of that age, the leaders of the town were far sighted enough to see that they had to carry out improvements to stimulate trade and to create pride in the town of Basingstoke or there would be stagnation. Other towns nearby, such as Andover and Stockbridge, were improving their own market facilities, providing a spur to Basingstoke. The Market Act and the rebuilding of the Town Hall were some of the first stages in the modernisation of the town. It can be judged how seriously the project was taken by the fact that in May 1832, at the time when the decision was taken to rebuild the Town Hall, it was realised that costs were going to be a severe strain and so the Mayor and Chamberlain agreed to their annual allowances being reduced, that of the Mayor from £80 to £20¹¹, thereby setting a fine example of public spiritedness.

¹ Hampshire Record Office (HRO) 148M1/47/1

² HRO 23M72P1.

³ Municipal Corporations in England and Wales *Report of Commission* 1835

⁴ Attwood diary HRO 8M62/27

⁵ Basingstoke Corporation Minute Book, HRO 148M71 1/3/101

⁶ HRO 148M71/1/5/3

⁷ Robinson, John Martin, *The Wyatts: An Architectural Dynasty*, OUP 1979

⁸ Attwood, *op cit* 2 May 1832

⁹ Attwood, *op cit* 5 October 1834

¹⁰ *Hampshire Chronicle*, 31st December 1850

¹¹ Attwood *op cit* 2 May 1832