

17 Fleet Street and Prince Henry's Room

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Number 17 Fleet Street is one of the few buildings in the City of London to survive the Great Fire in 1666. It has on its first floor a large room with fine wooden panelling and an intricate plaster ceiling.

From the middle of the 12th century, the whole area between Fleet Street and the Thames was the home of the Knights Templar, when they were removed from their original base in Holborn, and in 1185 their Round Church was dedicated. The order continued in possession until it was abolished by the Council of Vienna in 1312.

The property then passed to the Knights Hospitallers of the Order of St. John of Jerusalem, who granted a lease for a yearly rental to students of the law. Lawyers remain there to this day. The frontage to Fleet Street

was not included in this lease, which was occupied by the offices of the Order, and included an Inn, probably called "the hande" which was leased to Robert Bray in 1515. The records continue, and in 1598, John Bennett succeeded his father as the tenant. In 1609 John Bennett received a Royal grant of the office of sergeant-at-arms. In 1610 he decided to rebuild, and there is a detailed agreement with the Inner Temple "to rebuild his house, called the Prince's Arms, adjoining to, and over, the Inner Temple Gate, and may jettie over the said gate". In 1544, William Blake became the new owner, and his alehouse, the Princes Arms, extended over the gateway. After further sales, the premises were sold in 1671 to James Sotheby whose family continued to own it until 1900.

In 1544 the front part of the house was taken by Mrs. Clark, who for some time had run a business called Mrs. Salmon's Waxworks. The Morning Post carried a report: "... the figures are moved to the very spacious and handsome apartments... which were once the Palace of Henry, Prince of Wales, the eldest son of King James I, and they are now the residence of many a royal guest... Alexander the Great, King Henry VIII, Caracacus, and the present Duke of York. The waxworks continued here until about 1816.

The attribution of the room to Henry, Prince of Wales, is not firmly established. It could just have been the upper room of an inn, the Prince's Arms, decorated with the arms of the most recent Prince of Wales. The quality of the workmanship of the ceiling and panelling makes this interpretation seem



unlikely. It is known that the offices of the Duchy of Cornwall were in Fleet Street, so it is possible that this room was the Council Chamber for the Duchy, to which Henry became entitled when he was created Prince of Wales in 1610. The Prince died in 1612, so his association with this fine room would have been a short one at best.

The London County Council became interested in the site in 1895 when it became known that the owner wished to demolish the building and rebuild on the site. It was suggested that the Council should use its powers to acquire sites of historical interest, and should restore the building. The consent of the City Corporation was sought for this proposal, and they not only consented but agreed to contribute £2,500 to the cost of the works on the understanding that the first floor room should be preserved for the public benefit. It was therefore acquired in 1900, and opened to the public in 1906.

The report of the LCC architect in 1900 stated that the building was in two blocks, the front one of four

storeys which extends over the gateway to Inner Temple Lane and the back block which was a modern office building. The two blocks were linked by a wooden staircase. At this time, the front elevation was a false or screen front of theatrical design in timber and glass, which completely masked the ancient building behind it. Eight carved oak panels from the original building were fixed to this front, but so covered with paint that their merit was unrecognisable

Some twenty inches behind the screen, the original half-timbered front from the early 1600s was discovered. It was shorn of its bay windows and otherwise mutilated, but with its essential features intact.

The great treasure of the house is the plaster ceiling in the room. It is believed to be unique in design, and is one of the best of the remaining Jacobean plaster ceilings. In the middle of the design is the Prince of Wales feather. The modelling was greatly obscured by paint and whitewash, and the ceiling generally had suffered from the sagging of the timbers to which it was attached and in parts had become insecure. The stained glass windows in the room are modern; they were presented by CY Sturge, a member of the Council. The left hand window has the arms of Prince Henry, and the right hand one alludes to the LCC.

17 Fleet Street was transferred from the London County Council to the Greater London Council, who in turn passed it to the City of London Corporation on 1st April 1969. It is not generally open to the public.



17 Fleet Street and Prince Henry's Room Additional notes

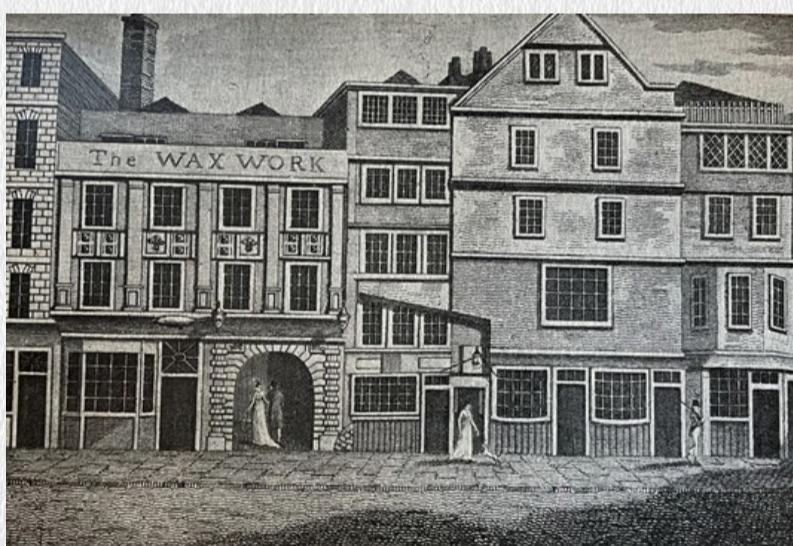
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Source: Original research

Additional note:



The previous facade until 1900



During restoration

