

Town Hall Teething Problems

by 'BEORCHAM'

Recent arguments about the future of the Town Hall provide yet another example of local history repeating itself. There were somewhat similar discussions as to site, size and style before the present building was erected over 112 years ago. For this article some hitherto unpublished material is used to supplement the information given in several *Review* articles which were reprinted in booklet form in 1960.

The old market house at the top of Water Lane was burnt down in August 1854, and almost immediately plans for a new building were discussed. The first hint that something more ambitious than a new market house should be provided appears in the Mechanics' Institute minute book, dated September 20th, 1854. The rector, the Rev.

James Hutchinson, advised the Institute not to proceed with its plans to build a reading-room, as he had heard that arrangements might be made to incorporate a suitable room in the new market house.

PEPPERCORN RENT

At the request of twenty people, a public meeting of the parishioners was held at the King's Arms in October 1854, to consider what measures were to be taken. A committee was formed, and many suggestions were debated, including the possibility of moving to a new site. However, in February 1856, a motion to the effect that the old site was 'not large enough for any other building to adjoin it' was defeated, objection being taken to the use of the word 'not'.

Nevertheless, it was thought that the inhabitants would subscribe sufficient money to build rooms for magistrates' meetings, lectures, a reading room for the Institute, etc., provided that a 99 years' lease at a peppercorn rent was granted by the Duchy of Cornwall, owners of the site, and Earl Brownlow, the lessee.

PERMISSION WITHHELD

In June 1856, Earl Brownlow's mother, Lady Marion Alford, wrote: 'I am sorry the Court of Chancery will not permit us to do more than erect a sufficient market house on the site of that burned down. I am sorry that all improvements on the old arrangements are thus forbidden us: but I hope that when Earl Brownlow comes of age he may be inclined to do more. We are debarred from an exercise of taste in what we do, and perhaps it is better so.'

Not a very hopeful prospect. Earl Brownlow would remain a minor until 1863.

Despite the stubborn attitude of the Court of Chancery, it was

decided, at a meeting held in August 1856, to invite public subscriptions for a new market house with public rooms, and through the good offices of William Hazell, a grocer, a site about 120 yards west of the old market house was acquired for £825. In July 1857, Lady Marion wrote: 'If the Town of Berkhamsted should agree to build a market house on the site of the newly-purchased ground and will divide it off from the rest of the ground and make it over to the Duchy on the Duchy's own terms, I can see no reason to object.' A week later, another public meeting was called, 'to come to a decision'. General Finch, chairman, said that the lessee (Earl Brownlow) was released from any obligation to rebuild on the old site on payment of a contribution of £300 towards the new building. The General was also able to announce that, excluding the Brownlow contribution, the sum of £1,300 had already been subscribed.

WHAT THE CRITICS SAID

So far, so good. But if we are to believe a scurrilous and anonymous leaflet which was circulated soon after the Town Hall was formally opened in 1860, 'many old residents objected to the old site', 32 having sent 'a memorial to Ashridge, praying that the market house might be re-erected on the old site, in the best business part of the town, not where it now stands'. It seems that there was also some support for 'a better alternative site' on the west side of the King's Arms, opposite the old market house.

The leaflet goes on to say that one of the excuses for choosing Mr. Hazell's site was that it was 'to get it away from the public house' (the Bell, popularly called the One Bell, which stood on the site now occupied by the empty shop in front of Tesco's store). Yet soon after the Town Hall was opened, a new public house (the White Hart) was built next door!

A CHOICE OF PLANS

Going back to the events of 1858, the people who favoured the present site, almost certainly an over-

whelming majority, invited four architects to submit plans for the new building. At a meeting held in January 1858, Mr. Low's plan was considered the best. But it was necessary to consult Lady Marion, who preferred the plan submitted by Mr. A. B. Lamb. The committee at once fell in with her wishes, though subsequently the Mechanics' Institute found fault with the lighting of a lecture room by a skylight and asked for the plan to be modified.

Work on the combined Town

Hall and Market House started early in 1859, and some of the rooms were used months before the building was formally opened in August 1860. The date above the door, however, is 1859, and in the market house there is a stone bearing the following inscription: 'A. B. Lamb, architect; W. Nash and T. & J. Matthews, builders.' I doubt whether fifty townspeople have ever seen this interesting reminder that two local firms of builders united to erect the town's most controversial building.

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