

# The Building of the present Town Hall, Chester

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(Read 6th January, 1960)

**I**N most cities which were in existence in medieval times civic business and the buildings appropriate to civic affairs had a dual origin—part legal and part commercial. Chester was no exception, and various buildings were in use at different times: the former Common Hall off Bridge Street, about whose exact site there is still much argument;<sup>1</sup> the Common Hall at St. Nicholas's Chapel (now the Music Hall cinema); the Pentice, an extension to the south front of St. Peter's Church, which was pulled down at the beginning of the 19th century; and the Exchange in Northgate Street.<sup>2</sup>

It was this building, which began to be used in 1698, which was replaced by the present Town Hall in the middle of the last century. The ground floor (originally built as an arcade) had been filled in with shops and offices during the 18th century, and the civic offices were above. On the front of the building, flanked by tablets of the Royal Arms and the Arms of the Earl of Chester, was the statue of Queen Anne which can still be seen (but shamefully neglected) by the Water Tower. As late as 1853/4 the building had been generally repaired and restored. Then in 1862 it was destroyed by fire:

"About twenty past six that evening [30.12.1862] suspicion was excited that the roof of the Exchange was on fire, in consequence of some persons observing a bright light immediately above the sessions chamber. They informed the police of the fact and the hose reel was brought out. It soon became evident that their suspicions were well founded."

So wrote the reporter of the "Chester Record," whose own suspicions were obviously also well founded, for neither fire service nor police were equal to the occasion. The former could do little with hoses which were not long enough to reach the building, and the police<sup>3</sup> seemed incapable of controlling the crowds (although there was only one casualty when parts of the roof collapsed).

On the 14th January, 1863, the Council met in Lower Bridge Street "at the house lately occupied by Mr. Snape" to consider the provision of a new Hall. A Committee was set up to report, in the first instance, on whether or not to rebuild on the old site. It is with the minute books of this Committee, which began a long

<sup>1</sup>Business was transferred to St. Nicholas Chapel in 1488, but in 1553 the building was let to Ralph Goodman (Fishmonger) for 6d. a year, and he had permission to "pull down, remove or take away" the old buildings as he wished.—Corporation Deeds, c/CH/2/11.

<sup>2</sup>In my talk to the Society there was some discussion of these buildings, but only as introduction to the description of the present building. There are various articles on these former buildings in earlier numbers of the Journal.

<sup>3</sup>Then under a newly appointed Inspector of Police named Jones who had never served in a police force and of whom the *Chronicle* wrote: "He writes like a coal heaver and spells like a Lord, and knows no more about the duties of a police officer than the Brazilians know about skating."

series of meetings on the 20th January, 1863, and did not finish work until 1878, that this article is mainly concerned.<sup>4</sup> The only business of the first meeting was to appoint a firm of builders (*Holmes of Liverpool*) as agents who would report on the existing ruins. This report, considered early in February, discussed the origins of the fire and showed that the trouble lay in the fact that many of the old beams had been laid too near to the flues. Although Holmes favoured the preservation of the old building in theory, it was apparent that the destruction had been so great that the provision of a new building was essential. Going beyond his brief Holmes counselled the Committee to consider taking the opportunity of assembling all the civic offices under one roof.

This suggestion suited the members of the Committee, but the Council itself was uncertain about such ideas—expense was the fundamental issue. Other plans were mooted. Mr. William Titherington offered to sell Forest House in Dee Hills Park; some advocated raising a new building in Northgate Street connected to other new buildings on the south side of Princess Street by way of underground passages. But it soon became obvious that a new building of the size now needed (roughly three times that of the old building) would be, in fact, the most economical (as well as the most sensible) plan. And when the Council met in November 1863 it agreed to the Committee's recommendation, and then reappointed the Committee to carry out its own intentions. The Treasury had given permission to borrow up to £4,500 to buy the proposed site (the land bounded by Princess Street, Northgate Street, Saracen's Head Inn and the road to the new market hall). All that remained to be decided was how to obtain a building: whether to appoint an architect or to hold a public competition. It was the second method which was finally chosen, and the Committee advertised that they would award prizes of £100 and £50 for the best designs. All they stipulated was that the building should be "economical and substantial rather than ornamental," that the total cost should not exceed £16,000,<sup>5</sup> and that the building "should harmonise with the general features of the ancient city."<sup>6</sup> The local newspapers had some comments to make, and this extract from the *Chronicle* represents a typical reaction:

"The ancient city is a medley—shops look like convents, banks like Grecian Temples and our leading hotel will soon be a leading contender for that mixed order which defies all classification."

All too soon the day appointed for the opening of the designs (submitted under pseudonyms) had come upon the committee, and after failing to obtain a room in which to hang the entries at the Royal Hotel, the Committee made use of the

<sup>4</sup>Town Hall Committee, Minute Books 1-7, 1863-1878. The Committee met 250 times, but 200 of these meetings were before 1871.

<sup>5</sup>Originally fixed at £12,000, but raised to £16,000 in later advertisements.

<sup>6</sup>It was also suggested that the building should harmonise with Hay's new market, of the front of which one Councillor said

"it is of great simplicity and boldness, well united to the background and breaking into an almost aerial lightness and most picturesque skyline."

Roodee Grandstand.<sup>7</sup> There some thirty designs were on view. The Committee minutes speak of a variety of styles, "Gothic," "Tudor," "Elizabethan," "Modern," but the unsuccessful designs were (unfortunately for us) returned to the competitors. Estimated costs ranged from £13,000 to £20,000.<sup>8</sup> But all consideration was in vain; eight designs were set aside for further consideration, but after another week of discussion the laymen of the Committee decided to seek professional advice. The Royal Institute of British Architects was invited to nominate an assessor from among leading architects who were not themselves competitors, and very soon R. Wyatt was engaged at a fee of 500 guineas.

Wyatt's report, late in July 1864, caused a considerable stir. The design submitted by W. H. Lynn of Belfast<sup>9</sup> was considered the best entry, and that of E. Helfer of Liverpool to be the runner up. At once there was a general outcry that Lynn's design would cost more than the permitted £16,000 and that it did not adhere to certain other conditions. While the Committee sensibly agreed not to enter into any dispute on the relative merits of the designs, it did decide to withhold the prize money until the architect's could show that there were builders willing to tender for the proposed buildings within the limit of costs. At the same time the Councillors were perturbed by a letter from the Recorder saying that the proposed Sessions Court would not be satisfactory.

Both prize winners responded. Helfer enclosed a tender from a local builder for £15,529, Lynn argued that the stipulation was unique in such public competitions. Nevertheless he sent private estimates which showed that, if it were carried out in brick and not stone, his design could be built for £16,597, or for £15,191 if the central Tower were not included. The Committee decided to play safe. Lynn's firm was commissioned to prepare working drawings (both with and without a tower) and to observe the following conditions:

- i. that the Sessions Court be replaced by a Public Assembly Hall, "with orchestra."
- ii. that the design without a tower should include walls of sufficient strength to support a tower if it were subsequently decided to build one.
- iii. that the total costs should not exceed £16,000, and
- iv. that the arrangements of the cells and police departments be considerably rearranged.

<sup>7</sup>The Council still lacked its own room—the various offices were still mainly in temporary quarters in Lower Bridge Street, monthly Council meetings were held in the Grosvenor Road Savings Bank.

<sup>8</sup>The building was to include the following rooms:

Council Chamber	50' by 35'
Main Committee Room	26' by 18'
Sessions Court	80' by 40' (by 30' high)
Justices Court	50' by 35'
Justices Retiring Room (to serve also as a Library)	
Muniment Room (to be fireproof)	
10 cells and accommodation for a police force of 50 men; various offices for civic officials, etc.	
a Hallkeeper's flat	
a large kitchen, pantry, cellaring, etc.	
(the kitchens were to be sufficiently large to cater for civic functions, banquets, etc.)	

<sup>9</sup>Partner in Lanyon, Lynn & Lanyon, Belfast, and designer of many public buildings in Canada and Australia (particularly many of the government buildings at Canberra)

But the drawings were to be of a stone building—a statement which seems incomprehensible when taken in conjunction with the stipulation about cost—and this factor was to be of major importance later.

In October 1864 Lynn was present at a meeting of the Committee and established personal contact with most of his future employers for the first time.<sup>10</sup> There was much discussion about details—the number of steps leading to the Council Chamber, the provision of extra w.cs., and so on—but in general there was friendly agreement and the minutes record an expression of the Committee's pleasure at its choice of architect. He was ordered to prepare the detailed drawings for the spring of 1865.

In the interval little could be done. The public house, "Eastham Packet," which stood on part of the site was purchased, but nothing further was done about the other public houses, "Saracen's Head" and "Market Inn" which occupied the frontage between the new site and the market. Lynn showed preliminary plans early in 1865 and on his promise to have all the drawings available by March 1st tenders were invited after that date, with the closing date set for March 21st. But from the start the Committee felt frustrated. On March 7th they were told that the plans would not be available for a while, and when tenders finally began to arrive the costs were seen to be alarming. The lowest was over £21,000, the highest over £27,000<sup>11</sup>—for tenders were invited for a building with a Tower and for a version without a tower. For months the matter was discussed both by the Council and the Committee, until at last the Council suggested that either the resolution of August 1863 (about the site and style of building) or that of September 1864 (accepting Lynn's design) should be rescinded. Even this was considered by the Committee and, as a preliminary, the Town Clerk was asked to find out what the architect's account was, to date, for the planning work done. When told that this amounted to £1,400 the Committee thought it would be well to consider no further, but to erect a stone building without a tower and accept a local builder (Clarke) as executant at a cost of £21,610. The contract was not finally settled until September 1865 as Clarke wanted to have a saving clause about time lost because of strikes or lockouts, but the Committee insisted on its original intention that completion would be possible within two years. It was agreed that the foundation stone be laid on October 25th.

Only a week before this took place there was a hurried attempt to mark the importance of the occasion. The Surveyor was ordered to clear a space on which to erect a stand for six hundred spectators; The Bishop, the Members of Parliament, the Artillery and Rifle Volunteers, together with the Volunteer Fire Brigade and the Blue Coat Scholars were to be invited to join the Mayor's party in a procession from the Savings Bank. Everyone was available and, after unveiling the Combermere Statue at the Castle entrance, the dignitaries and others marched to Northgate

<sup>10</sup>He had earlier met a few of the members of the Committee at an informal meeting.

<sup>11</sup>The Architect's fee of 5% of costs would add £1,000 or more.

Street to lay the stone, and then went to the Music Hall for a banquet. In his speech the Mayor hoped

“that they might soon see the ugly block of buildings now dignified by the name of the Bishop’s Palace razed to the ground and a magnificent square laid out—with a statue of Earl Grosvenor in the centre.”

But almost at once other problems arose. It had been part of the original intention to widen Princess Street and the competition rules had laid down that the architect should leave twentyone feet between the corner of the building and the opposite side of Princess Street. The foundations showed that this distance would be only thirteen feet: Lynn was asked to explain. He demonstrated that the error lay with the city—the original dimensions of the area, supplied to the competitors, had been miscalculated. The mood of ill confidence between Lynn and the Committee was not helped by the latter’s decision to reduce the architect’s first account (for £783) by £100, pointing out that the value of the prize for the winning design was to be withheld if those designs were used to erect a building.

For the next few months work went on steadily if slowly, with only a dispute about the quality of the stone being used.<sup>12</sup> Then Lynn proposed that the walls of the interior corridors be in yellow glazed bricks, but while this was deferred for further discussion a more startling situation arose. The stonemasons went on strike.

Relations between them and Gargan, the Clerk of Works, had begun ill. It may be that the employment of a stranger, most of whose experience had been in Ireland, had been ill conceived. Petty disputes were made into major issues. Both sides, it seems, welcomed a fight. The Committee refused to meet a deputation of workmen. Clarke, the builder, told that he would be responsible for fulfilling the contract, suddenly fell ill and died a few days later. His successor, Hughes of Aldford, would only agree to continue the building if he were allowed another year and a half in which to do it and if extensions were allowed for strikes.

Months of inactivity followed this new agreement. The strikers had lost their greatest weapon with the extension of the time allowed. A letter from Lynn in October 1866 argued that it would be wrong to give in to the strikers, whose demands were considered “unprecedented.” Indeed the Committee was bombarded by letters, from Hughes, Lynn, the operative Masons, and various citizens and other interested parties in all parts of England who looked upon the Chester strike as a “*cause celebre*.” Finally Hughes was ordered to advertise a return to work with other men, and this brought matters to a head. The Committee agreed to receive a deputation from the Bradford headquarters of the Society of Masons and learned that the objections to Gargan’s behaviour and language were so great that their members would never work with him again. Gargan himself was heard, and both sides produced witnesses. The Committee remained undecided: some were for sacrificing Gargan, others feared he would have an action against the city, others again were intent on not

<sup>12</sup>Lynn’s design called for the use of contrasting colours of “red” and “white” stone, a feature of the building which ceased to be apparent when the exterior became so dirty that the original colours could no longer be discerned.

giving way to the demands of organised labour (a group which had rallied much national support). Then, in December, Lynn persuaded the Committee to do nothing for a while (the strike was then six months old) as he had hopes of a way out of the difficulty. But this (which hinged on transferring Gargan to another site) came to nothing and in March 1867 a new clerk of works named Pearce was appointed to take Gargan's place, the latter being given £50 compensation.

The nine months stoppage had given Lynn much time for second thoughts about a variety of details. From this point on the story is one of growing disagreement, almost exasperation, between Committee and Architect.<sup>13</sup> The Committee, in view of the continual rise in costs, was in little mood for changes, and most of Lynn's proposals were vetoed. One, for raising the height of the assembly room, was accepted on condition that the extra cost was not more than £220. In November members of the Committee visited the site, but otherwise were not active. But by February, 1868 Lynn had a new list of changes and improvements to propose. Most important was the question of the Tower: it became obvious that, although the design without a Tower had been suggested to keep within the permitted costs, Lynn had little intention of allowing the finished building to be without a Tower if he could prevent it. Other changes included the provision of a balcony in the Public Hall (hence the need for greater height), improved flooring, roof tiling and other changes. And on the major issue Lynn had his way: the Tower was to be added after all. The Committee which decided this also agreed that all future meetings would be held in one of the ground floor rooms of the new building.

With the completion of part of the Town Hall the question of decoration became important and a sub-committee was set up to deal with it. It was this sub-committee which decided on the subjects to be represented in the carved panels in the vestibule and waiting hall—subjects which are now different from first ideas.<sup>14</sup> Another issue discussed at this time was that of whether or not to install a clock in the Tower.<sup>15</sup> Again cost was the decisive factor, but while the matter was still not resolved it was suggested that there might be a way of obtaining a cheap clock from the War Office. A clock (9' 6" in diameter) had apparently been made in London and had been intended for the new tower at Woolwich Arsenal, but was not to be installed. The Committee was never willing to miss a possible bargain: the Town Clerk was ordered to write to the Secretary for War to find out its price. A week later (this was November 1868) the reply was encouraging: the clock could be inspected at Woolwich and was available "at a reasonable price." Even so the committee was cautious—and on this occasion caution paid. The Town Clerk was ordered to write again to find the lowest acceptable cost: at the same time it was

<sup>13</sup>Of the matters discussed the only one of importance today was that of the south-east corner, which Lynn wished to alter to allow a future scheme to use the space between the market and the new building.

<sup>14</sup>Among subjects not adopted in the final plan were the Prince of Wales (the first Royal Earl of Chester) receiving homage, and Egbert uniting the heptarchy.

<sup>15</sup>The tower was at this time in the last stages of construction, with the panels left for clock faces, and it was now decided to erect a lightning conductor. At this time the contractor had the building insured for £10,000.

decided to spend up to £5 on having the clock inspected. The replies were considered on December 7th. The War Office merely asked that the Council should make an offer: the inspector's report settled the matter. The clock was stated to be a huge affair, "more powerful than Big Ben," which would cost more to alter to fit the Chester tower than it would to buy a new one, and that its mechanism would require winding for an hour every day.<sup>16</sup>

1869 opened with another problem. At the first meeting of the Committee in January normal business was suspended for urgent business brought by the Mayor. He reported that the South Wall of the public hall had given way to such an extent that it was in a dangerous state. The contractor was seen and he reported that Lynn had already ordered him to begin the erection of a permanent buttresses. Naturally the Committee found further reason to be displeased with Lynn, and matters were not improved when the architect explained that the changes in wall structure were consequent upon the roofing changes agreed upon earlier. But all passed off when Lynn argued that the only alternative to external buttressing was complete reconstruction! In fact the Committee was at this time so concerned about the mounting costs<sup>17</sup> that it resolved to have plain glass in the main windows in the hall and staircase, a resolution which brought an angry letter from Lynn arguing that the city would be "alone in a lack of stained glass embellishments." Other urgent matters included the question of the hall flooring and only by one vote was it agreed to install a spring floor suitable for dancing.

The Committee was not alone in this spurt of activity. A stream of visitors and sightseers became such a nuisance at the site that the builders were forced to ask for them to be forbidden; and a great correspondence arrived from interested citizens with numerous suggestions for decorations and improvements. A few of the more interesting ones may be noticed. The Committee of the Chester Law Library asked for permission to have the library given accommodation in the new building.<sup>18</sup> "A citizen" offered to meet the expense of putting stained glass in one of the circular windows on the Grand Staircase.<sup>19</sup> One correspondent suggested that the space in front of the Town Hall be cleared—and this, which involved pulling down the former Butter Market (temporarily the Police Station), was done.

Yet another sub-committee was set up to appoint a Hall Keeper, after deciding on his duties (and salary), with the stipulation that he must be a married man whose wife would assist with the cleaning. In August 1869 the main recommendations of this sub-committee were accepted: that the person appointed would live rent

<sup>16</sup>Although the faces of the Tower remain without clocks up to the present the Council did decide, in 1870, that the Market Clock and St. Peter's Clock should be regulated by Greenwich time.

<sup>17</sup>The interior furnishings were yet to be considered, and little remained from the Old Exchange, except for the City's collection of portraits which had been stored meanwhile in the Cathedral Chapter House.

<sup>18</sup>This was agreed, on condition that the library could be used by the magistrates, Town Clerk and other officers.

<sup>19</sup>The offer was accepted. The donor wrote again later suggesting that his window should portray Gherbod and Hugh, the first Earls of Chester, in the hope that others might pay for portraits of the other non-royal Earls.

free in the flat provided,<sup>20</sup> wear official uniform, and receive £65 per annum. The keeper was "to do all duties of a hall keeper" and be responsible for cleaning the whole building (with one assistant besides his wife); the first keeper was not to be over 40 years old on appointment. Those who applied for the post included bakers and railwaymen, a house servant and a "letter-carrier," but most applicants were ex-soldiers. One of these, John Ellis, was given the post. He was to wear a dress suit of blue cloth, with scarlet collars, scarlet piping on the trousers and a scarlet waistcoat, and with gilt buttons bearing the City arms.<sup>21</sup> All was now ready for the opening of the hall.

The opening ceremony provided an opportunity for pageantry, for petty jealousies, even for profit. Galleries to seat over 2,500 were erected on (what is now) the Town Hall Square and after giving about 500 tickets to various official guests, the Committee decided to offer the others to those who wished to subscribe to the Town Hall Rebuilding Fund, and they were to be allocated in proportion to the amount subscribed.<sup>22</sup> The ceremony itself went well: the Prince of Wales and the Prime Minister (Mr. Gladstone) attracted tremendous crowds.<sup>23</sup> And after the official opening there were three days when the building was open to all and sundry who wished to look over it.

The work of the Committee was now almost done. Much of the interior furnishing had still to be done, but it was no longer a building committee. Indeed the most frequent items in the minutes of the Committee during the following months were those concerned with the letting of rooms to all those bodies who had long been waiting for them: the Library Committee, the City Mission, The Volunteers, the Christian Temperance Society and so on.<sup>24</sup> Many of these were readily accommodated and the Committee prepared itself for dissolution. But the story was not quite over: troubles, at first only minor ones, began to arise. When a fire was lighted in the Treasurer's office the smoke found its way into the mouth pieces of the speaking tubes; there were continuous complaints of draughts from the Tower; Council members sat and shivered in their chamber.<sup>25</sup>

The new year brought the Committee full circle. So much trouble had by then been associated with the fireplaces that workmen had taken up the flooring in front of one wall which seemed overheated. It was then found that

"the small beam or rafter was charred so much that air only was wanting to ignite it . . . the wood is laid on the flue,"

<sup>20</sup>This flat was where the Superintendent of Police now has his office; the doorway to it can be seen on the ground floor (i.e. at street level) to the left of the exterior staircase when facing the building.

<sup>21</sup>At the same time two Sergeants of the Militia were appointed to act as Sword and Mace bearers (at three guineas a year); they were to wear claret coloured suits with knee breeches and black silk stockings.

<sup>22</sup>A rather rough proportion: 10/- subscribers received one ticket, a £200 subscriber received 30 tickets.

<sup>23</sup>There were many pleased comments on the contrasting colours of the facing stones (red and white) and of the green and red tiles on the roof. After the opening ceremony there were fireworks and a great banquet for 400 people in the new Hall. The centrepiece was a copy of the new building, a cake made by Mr. Bolland.

<sup>24</sup>The Temperance Society was refused on the grounds that their meeting might lead to damage—a refusal which produced the following retort: "The excitement of tea will not prevent the Company protecting the building and furniture of the Hall" (John Jones to T.H. Committee, 27.11.1869)

<sup>25</sup>Among other matters all the locks on the principal doors had to be replaced as useless.



and similar flues were noticed elsewhere. The exact similarity to Holme's report on the burning down of the old Exchange excited angry comment. £30,000 to replace a building burnt out in a manner which might now be repeated seemed an excessive figure. And how could these intricate and ill-charted flues be cleared?<sup>26</sup> Lynn disagreed with the Committee's strictures,<sup>27</sup> but the only thing was to put the matter to the test, especially as there were more and more complaints about rooms and corridors being filled with smoke. An expert<sup>28</sup> was consulted and he reported

"as regards construction the flues are very bad, in fact there is only eight chimneys that can be swept out of twenty seven . . . and those that can be swept only with the greatest difficulty."

The very next item on the agenda at the meeting discussing this report was a complaint from the Watch Committee that although the lockups had been provided with water closets there was no water system to them which would allow them to be used!<sup>29</sup>

The question of cost was also a major issue. The capital account stood as follows:

RECEIPTS								£	s.	d.
Sale of salvaged material from Old Exchange <sup>30</sup>	...	...	...	...	...	...	118	11	5	
Assurance on old Exchange	...	...	...	...	...	...	4,575	0	0	
Cash borrowed on mortgage	...	...	...	...	...	...	27,450	0	0	
Total							32,143	11	5	

  

EXPENDITURE								OUTSTANDING		
				£	s.	d.	£	s.	d.	
Site	...	...	...	5,291	14	2	—	—	—	
Architect	...	...	...	874	4	4	745	0	0	
Building	...	...	...	22,000	0	0	6,215	0	11½	
Minor items	...	...	...	3,977	12	11	1,456	11	1½	
Laying out Town Hall Square	...	...	...	—	—	—	516	2	6	
Total							41,076	6	0	

Apart from the £8,000 still needed, Huxleys now agreed to sell the Saracen's Head for £1,800, but the Northgate Brewery wanted at least £2,500 for the Market Inn. The Council was astonished at the reply from Whitehall to their request for per-

<sup>26</sup>The final plans did not show the path of the main flues in the building.

<sup>27</sup>Lynn also counter attacked with a complaint of his own:

"We cannot help expressing surprise that our account for services extending over a period of two years should have been allowed to remain for such a considerable time without either notice or acknowledgement." (March 1870)

<sup>28</sup>R. Hall of Stockport, Chimney Architect and Consultant. He tried sweeping the chimneys from above using weighted lines; he also had soot doors made in twenty-two flues where access to corners of the flues was reasonably easy (T.H. Committee 2.9.1870). Even this did not ease the situation altogether, for Ellis, the hallkeeper, reported afterwards that all but five chimneys still smoked very badly. (T.H. Committee 2.9.70). The provision of central heating came later.

<sup>29</sup>Too much water of another kind was noticed whenever there was very heavy rain: the downspouts on the tower were inadequate and water even found its way into the Mayor's Parlour.

<sup>30</sup>The expenditure included (here given among "Minor Items") "Expenses in connection with the Fire," £118 12s. 11d., so that even the salvage money was 1.6d. less than the fire cost the Council!

mission to borrow more money—the Treasury referred to two private memorials received from citizens of Chester, both objecting to the purchase of the Saracen's Head Inn.<sup>31</sup> One was from a City Alderman, Mr. Frost, who referred to “this untenanted and dilapidated building”<sup>32</sup> and also sent to London a copy of his pamphlet “An Insight into the finances of the City of Chester.” The other, from a Mr. Harrison, said that the proposed purchase was

“an additional burden to our over-taxed city caused chiefly by the great expense on a Town Hall, erected at the cost of a sum approaching to £50,000.”<sup>33</sup>

When the Treasury's reply was read out there was uproar in the Council. The Town Clerk was ordered to write again going more fully into all the reasons in favour of the purchase. The affair is particularly interesting in that it is a good example (so often to be repeated in our own times) of full discussion of a local government proposal only after local protest. For the Council had a good case.

It agreed that the Inn was empty, but it might be replaced by something unsuitable; the site was needed for additional market space, and the Council had intended later seeking the compulsory purchase of the Market Inn.<sup>34</sup> As to the objections from Frost and Harrison, the one was an expression of the Alderman's pique for being continually defeated on the subject in Council, the second was careless in its figures.<sup>35</sup> Before any reply was received from the Treasury Frost had organised a public meeting (in the Town Hall itself), a meeting described as “crowded to overflowing,” at which a resolution against the proposed purchase had been carried unanimously. As a result two new memorials were sent to the Treasury, one from 427 Ratepayers of the City, and one from Frost. The Alderman elaborated his earlier arguments: that the site was useless without that of the Market Inn, that new market space was not needed,<sup>36</sup> that the city had not recovered from the recent financial disaster of the cattle plague, and that many other new projects were scheduled—a new gaol, a new workhouse, a new draining system.

As a result of these later memorials the Treasury ordered the Council to hold a representative public meeting, but this the Council regarded as a waste of time. They replied that the 427 citizens at Frost's meeting were not representative: the names of the signatories included only 380 who paid rates, and these represented only about 7% of the total rateable value.<sup>37</sup> The chief arguments in the City's new memorial (which was to be delivered to the Treasury by civic officials in person)

<sup>31</sup>There is no evidence that Harrison and Frost knew of each other's letters before the report of this meeting was published, but afterwards they worked together. It is perhaps worth noting that although this affair was the only item discussed at this meeting the City Treasurer, in the course of a letter on the subject of finances, did mention the inconvenience of working in his office “continuously filled with dense clouds of smoke.”

<sup>32</sup>Frost to Lords Commissioners of the Treasury, 26-9-1870.

<sup>33</sup>Harrison to the same 30-9-1870.

<sup>34</sup>i.e. under an Improvement Act (private legislation).

<sup>35</sup>Town Clerk to the same 7-11-1870.

<sup>36</sup>It is to be noted that market rents declined by £200 in 1869.

<sup>37</sup>The total rateable value of the city was £102,437 18s. 1d. The 380 citizens were rated at £7,528 17s. 4d.

were that the Council resolutions on the subject were approved by large majorities, that the building would be let until the site was redeveloped, that the price represented about half the expected cost. When the Mayor, Sheriff and Town Clerk went to London with these arguments they obtained the necessary consent, provided they sent to London a memorial in favour of the scheme signed by "numerous and influential ratepayers." This was soon done.<sup>38</sup>

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From 1871 to 1878 the Committee continued in (fitful) existence, before it was finally decided that a committee to arrange for the construction of the building was not necessary when the building existed. But there are some interesting and amusing entries among the later minutes: for example

"Resolved that a police constable call at the Post Office each morning for the Mayor, so that the Mayor may have them in proper time."

which seems a reasonable corrective to all who complain about modern postal services.

The resolution

"Ordered that smoking be strictly prohibited in the Town Hall."

was followed immediately by the reading of a letter from the Rifle Volunteers seeking permission to smoke after their annual dinner, "the Corps providing the spittoons."<sup>39</sup>

Much argument occurred on the subject of painting the names of Mayors and Sheriffs on panels in the Committee Rooms, and when it was finished it was found that all the dates were wrong by one year.<sup>40</sup>

An interesting suggestion made to the Committee was that the Chester Cross might be restored and placed in the Town Hall Square. But the remains of the Cross were then lying in the grounds of Netherleigh House and the owner refused to let them be removed.<sup>41</sup>

But the entries which probably upset the Committee most were those referring to the Contribution Box. This box (which still exists at the foot of the main staircase) had been provided when it was found that visitors were in the habit of giving tips to Ellis. In future he was to refuse them, but he would receive a quarter of all gifts put in the City Charities Box. After this (September 1871) the monthly meetings began with a report on the amount in the box; a six-month period taken at random

<sup>38</sup>The memorial was presented on 13 January, 1871.

<sup>39</sup>I.H. Committee 26-1-1871.

<sup>40</sup>ditto 5-12-1871.

<sup>41</sup>When the city did recover the Cross it was erected in the garden at the Newgate.

shows the gifts to have totalled 1/3d.; nil; 1/-; 1d.: nil.<sup>42</sup> There is good evidence that Ellis did not do without his private tips; in 1876 he was dismissed for neglect of duties.<sup>43</sup>

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Since the 1870's the Town Hall has ceased to be the home of all the city's offices. Some have found accommodation in the annexe at the back of Lynn's building, but others are divorced completely from the main building. For the time being, however, the Town Hall continues the tradition of earlier civic buildings and is looked at affectionately enough by those who regard the exterior as so much Victorian pomposity. Perhaps the new County Hall will encourage Chester's citizens to look for a new civic building: but it is to be hoped that any new building has a smoother genesis. Financial troubles, disagreements with the Architect, the strike of the Masons, the disappointment with so much of the completed building (not to mention another fire in 1897) after all it had been hoped to avoid—all these made the story a troubled one, but the successive members of the Committee did finally regard their task as done and the Committee for building the Town Hall held its last meeting on September 2nd, 1878.

<sup>42</sup>Six months from November 1872 to April 1873. The poor collection makes all the more startling the report of an attempt to rob the box. The eventual City Charity was the Police Poor Box.

<sup>43</sup>T.H. Committee 20-11-1876. He was succeeded by Police Inspector John Lindsay.