

THE WESTMINSTER GUILDHALL
AND
THE WESTMINSTER SANCTUARY.

ON October 18th, 1930, the members of the Society paid a visit to the Middlesex Guildhall, Westminster, where they were received by their President, Sir Montagu Sharpe. Before conducting them over the building, he gave a detailed account of its site, which is of great historical interest, for on this spot stood for many centuries the gloomy building known as the Westminster Sanctuary, or City of Refuge. It dated from a period probably not long after the Conquest, and we know that it was repaired and strengthened by Edward III (1327-77), and after the privileges of sanctuary were abolished, the building was not demolished until 1775.

It stood on the east side of Thorney island, a delta of land formed by the Tyburne stream, one arm of which entered the Thames below Westminster Bridge, and the other, after turning the Abbot's mill, joined the river a little above the Houses of Parliament. Crossing this small island which it is said only measured 650 x 430 yards, there ran in front of the Sanctuary the trackway from the ancient ford of the Thames, which, on leaving Thornea led through Cuforde (by Buckingham Palace) and on by Dover street and Hereford gardens, at both of which places remains of Roman pavement have been unearthed,* till it joined Watling Street by the Marble Arch.

The Sanctuary is thus described in *The History and Survey of London*, 1756, by W. Maitland (Vol II, p. 1342).

“At the west end of the Little Sanctuary are the remains of a prodigious strong stone building, of 290 feet square, or $72\frac{1}{2}$ the length of each side, and the walls in thickness no less than 25 feet. This fabrick originally had but one entrance, or door below, and that in the east side, with a window hard by, which seems to have been the only one below the height of 22 feet of the buildings, where the

* See *Royal Commission on Historical Monuments, Roman London*, p. 54 *re* discovery of Roman remains.



THE SANCTUARY, WESTMINSTER.

Etched by the County Architect, W. T. Curtis, F.R.I.B.A., in 1928 from an old drawing in the British Museum.

wall is reduced to three feet in thickness, and contains four windows about the height of ten, and width of three feet nine inches, which are still to be seen on the south side, where the narrowed wall still remains about the height of twelve feet.

“The area of this exceeding strong building, (exclusive of the arched cavities in the walls) by a wall from east to west, of two feet ten inches in thickness, is divided into two spaces of nine feet ten inches each in width, representing a frame for bells, which plainly evinces it to be the strong Bell Tower that was erected (as already mentioned) in the Little Sanctuary by Edward III for the use of the Collegiate church of St. Stephen. . . . This strong tower is at present made use of as a Tavern or Wine Vault.”

For a long period, certainly as early as c. 1628, Middlesex Justices had held Sessions in Westminster. They used for this purpose a building of great antiquity which was pulled down and replaced by the octagonal structure erected in 1805 from the design of Mr. S. P. Cockerell on the actual foundation of the former Westminster Sanctuary.

This Sessions House was a one storey building constructed upon a system of vaults with buttresses of enormous strength, which could not have been erected to support this building, and inasmuch as no building is known to have stood upon the site between the demolition of the Sanctuary in 1775, and the construction of the Sessions House in 1805, it is presumed that these vaults must have formed part of the Sanctuary but this fact was not realised until they had been demolished and a concrete raft discovered.

On passing of the Local Government Act, 1888, and the formation of the Middlesex County Council, this octagonal structure was enlarged and to a certain extent incorporated in the alterations and additions made to it from the plans of the County Architect, the late Mr. F. H. Pownall.

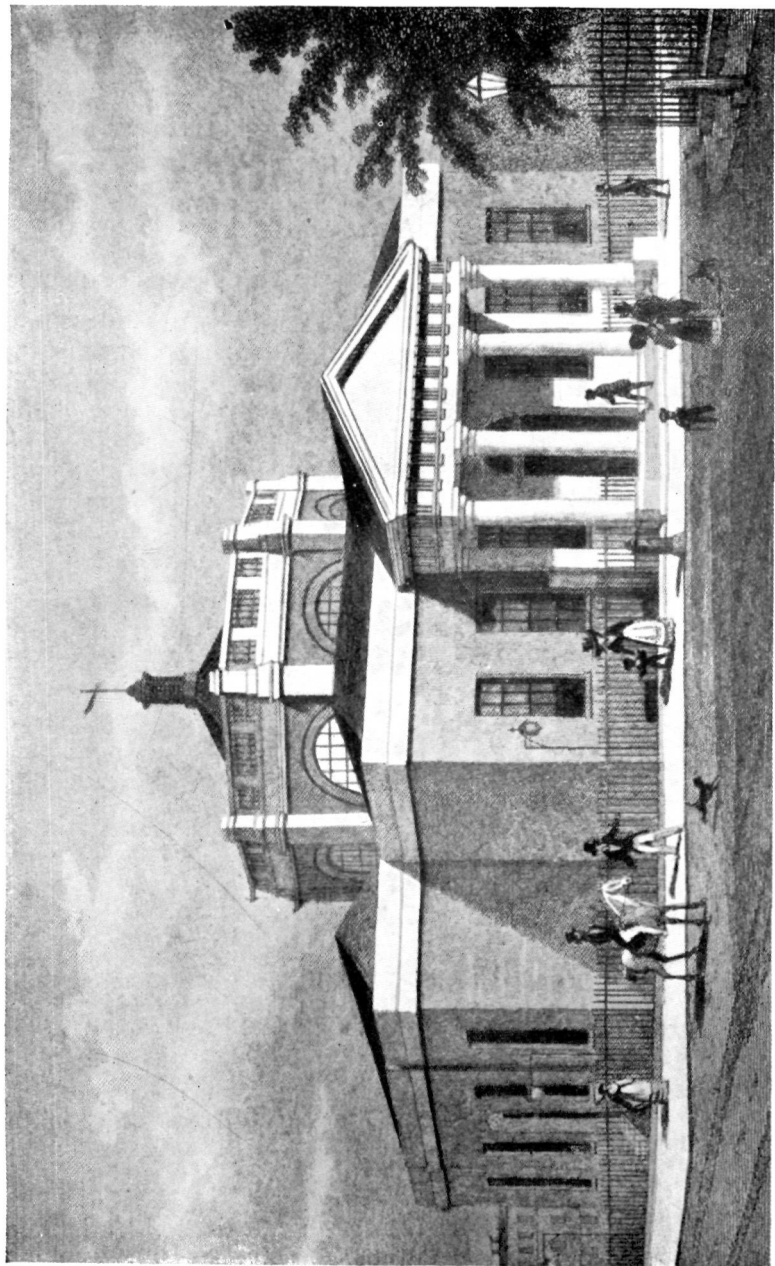
In consequence of the great increase in the work of Quarter Sessions, and further duties cast upon the County Council by Parliament, the enlarged Guildhall became in its turn quite inadequate for its purposes.

After the County Council had acquired in 1905 the adjacent premises of the National Society, the conclusion arrived at was that the interests of the County of Middlesex would best be served by clearing the whole site and erecting an entirely new building, namely, the present Guildhall.

In the 130 years which have elapsed since the Sanctuary was razed to the ground, local historians had begun to dispute as to its actual site, but it remained for the contractor of the new building to settle the point by an interesting discovery in the course of his preliminary excavations. This was in the form of a heavy rubble raft, 5 feet thick, and about 80 feet by 70 feet in plan, and rested on elm and beech piles about ten feet long, driven closely together into the subsoil. This solid and wonderfully well-preserved mass of masonry and concrete undoubtedly constituted the foundation on which the Norman builders raised the ponderous structure of the Sanctuary Keep. It is interesting to note that in Besant's *History of Westminster*, reference is made to this foundation, which the writer states is somewhere near the Abbey, and, when discovered, its dimensions will be found to be about 80 feet square. The discovery thus anticipated is the one actually made by Mr. Carmichael, the contractor when commencing the construction of this Guildhall, the dimensions of the ancient raft corresponding very nearly with those estimated by Besant.

After these extremely interesting details of the history of the site had been given by Sir Montagu Sharpe, the members of the Society were then shown the muniment rooms in which are carefully preserved the Sessions rolls and books commencing *tempo* Edward VI, now being calendared and indexed. They are of historical interest, inasmuch as until 1889 they relate to the geographical county of Middlesex which included London up to the boundaries of the city.

They next visited the Courts of the Middlesex Quarter



THE OLD GUILDHALL, WESTMINSTER, BUILT UNDER ACT OF PARLIAMENT ABOUT THE YEAR 1805, AS A SESSIONS HOUSE FOR THE COUNTY OF MIDDLESEX.

Sessions, in which are hung portraits by Van Somer, Reynolds, Gainsborough, Collier with others, and also the Committee rooms which contain prints and water colours of old time views and houses in the County. The members were then shown the Council Chamber where several interesting documents from the muniment room were displayed for their inspection, and afterwards they adjourned to the Anteroom for light refreshments before leaving the Guildhall.