

SECTION 2A:  
UNDERSTANDING THE TOWN HALL BUILDING

## Historical and Architectural Evolution

The Town Hall, St Albans – designed as a town hall and court house combined – occupies an important position in the town of St Albans.<sup>1</sup> Built in 1829-1831, the building is a prominent and distinguished piece of neo-Greek architecture designed by a known architect of the late-Georgian period of a good reputation in his lifetime. New research has established that the Town Hall of 1829-31 was in part built on the site of the Medieval moot hall - the town house of the Abbey before the Dissolution, which was granted to the corporation by Edward VI and thought to lie under the 1829-1831 Court House.<sup>2</sup> The 1829-1831 Town Hall provided a new premises for important civic functions, replacing an existing Sessions House and Town Hall on another site, and included cells for prisoners and accommodation for a gaoler.<sup>3</sup>



Early 20th century view of St Albans Town Hall



Engraving of Shire Hall, Fore Street

From 1792, there had been considerable efforts to improve and update the existing court room (“Sessions House”) with new partitions and new doors and rooms for the Grand Jury (bills were presented in 1794 by carpenter, bricklayer and plasterer).<sup>4</sup> In 1814 another extensive series of repairs and alterations were considered and executed.<sup>5</sup> In early 1825, the Corporation was exploring the idea of the selling the Town Hall and Sessions House and building a new one using the proceeds.<sup>6</sup> However, nothing is ever that simple.



Corn Exchange, Bishops Stortford

This sale and new development was prompted by immediate practical needs, but also no doubt inspired by other new shire halls and town halls being built within the county and beyond – there was certainly an early desire to include a “ballroom and supper room”. There were also a number of local models of more orderly neo-classical buildings that reflected the growing ambition for civic identity in this period: for instance, a handsome new Shire Hall had been built in the county town of Hertford to designs of James Adam in 1768 and a grand Corn Exchange in Bishop’s Stortford was designed by Lewis Vuillamy in 1828.<sup>7</sup>



George Smith's proposal for the Town Hall on an alternate site off Verulam Street



George Smith's Cross Section Design for St Albans Town Hall



Ground Floor Plan of St Albans Town Hall by George Smith  
The new Town Hall and Court House was to be a joint project

1. This account is based on Chris Green (2012) and Heather Jermy (2012) with additional information from Hertfordshire Country Records, Notes and Extracts from the Sessions Records, 1770-1840, Vol IV, compiled for Hertfordshire CC, by William Le Hardy and also Guide to the Hertfordshire Record Office, Part I, 1961, pp.55-56:

2. H.C.F.Lansberry, *The Building of St Albans Town Hall, 1829-31*, Hertfordshire Archaeology, Vol 1, 1968, pp.9297.  
3. See Gerard McSweeney, 'The Moot Hall and early Topography of St Albans', Hertfordshire Archaeology, Vol. 13, (1997-2003), 89-92  
4. Le Hardy, p.189. until the mid-17th century the Sessions House was

5. located in the Abbey gatehouse.  
6. Le Hardy pp.40-42.  
7. Ibid, p.130  
Ibid, p.174, pp.205-6.  
Pevsner, *Buildings of England: Hertfordshire*, 1977

between the Corporation and the Liberty magistrates. The process proved somewhat slow, reflecting in part the different priorities and expectations (an Act of Parliament was also required, which received Royal Assent in 1829). The Corporation and Liberty magistrates appointed George Smith as architect initially to survey the existing Sessions House and Town Hall and also to explore the alternative sites.<sup>8</sup>

Smith drew up designs for more than one site, not least to try and persuade the Corporation and Liberty not to build on the site of the existing Town Hall and Sessions House. It was agreed that the old Sessions house was “insufficient and inconvenient”.<sup>9</sup> Smith estimated that the repair and renovation of the existing hall would cost between £500-600, and thought the present site was “too much confined”. The existing Town Hall and Sessions House building had two frontages, which Smith thought highly unsuitable from a practical point of view, as “public buildings ought to be insulated for security and freedom of access” and recommended alternative sites where this could be achieved, including Romeland and a site on a garden off Verulam Street belonging to the Revd Kentish.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the Corporation rejected the other sites and finally the (final) St Peters Street site was chosen. New and ambitious plans were drawn up and finally approved.

After the decision on the site had been made, in 1829, tenders were sought and the lower ones tended accepted. The selected contractors were: the builder, R. Dean, R. Newport, plasterer, J. Smalley, ironmonger, and J. Wharton, painter.<sup>11</sup> A set of signed-off contract drawings gives clear evidence of the building as it was constructed, with inevitable minor variations. In 1827, the original project had been smaller: a “Bench, small retiring room, Grand Jury room with lobby for witnesses and a means of quitting the house without interfering with the court when on business”, but this had by now grown into a more multi-faceted public building. Plans for this original conception can be traced among a collection of 63 drawings at the Hertfordshire Record Archives (also referred to in reports by Green, 2012, and the conservation statement by Purcell, 2012) and a related set recently identified at the Victoria and Albert Museum.<sup>12</sup>

The final building, which stood proudly as the centerpiece of the public realm in the market place bounded by St Peters Street, was divided for uses created for the Corporation. They took possession of one-third of the structure and the primary civic frontage, while two-thirds of the executed design was dedicated to the work of the Liberty Justices (including the courtroom and cells below). For both uses, Smith created an elegant and compact structure with a double-height Assembly Room, and a double-height courtroom or Bench, Grand Jury Room, Petty Jury Room, and rooms for the Clerk of the Peace, Counsel and hall-keeper, along with a kitchen, pantry and wine cellar to support the hospitality of the Town Hall. The whole building was surrounded by iron railings of a distinctive design, provided by Smalley of Whitechapel, of which only a section survives at the south end – these originally advanced out into the marketplace, no doubt to control the press of the crowd.<sup>13</sup> They were matched by elegant, open iron gates into the entrance under the portico. The 1829 specifications also referred to the exterior being finished in Parker’s cement, which was stone coloured and not usually painted, and it seems this was most likely the treatment until the mid-to late twentieth century.<sup>14</sup>

By midsummer 1830, George Smith was authorized to fix bells and grates in the structure. The acceptance of Mr Smalley’s estimate for an enclosing set of railings was accepted (and these can still be seen



St Albans Town Hall postcard before the removal of the railings in 1880

in a mid-nineteenth century sketch before removal in the 1880s, and presumably would have served to control the hubbub of the market from spilling into the town hall).<sup>15</sup> It seems the Town Hall and Court House was largely complete by 1831.<sup>16</sup>

## George Smith

George Smith (1782-1869), while not usually regarded as a nationally famous architect, was an industrious and well-regarded architect in his own lifetime and the Town Hall can be ranked as one of his best works, and certainly his best surviving work.<sup>17</sup>

Smith was a local man, born at Aldenham in Hertfordshire, who was articled to Robert Brettingham, and worked in the offices of James Wyatt, Daniel Alexander, who worked on prisons and lighthouses, and lastly C. Beazley before he set up in his own right in around 1810.<sup>18</sup> A leading architectural historian, Prof. Howard Colvin has observed that he was “a careful and meticulous man whose office was a model of orderliness” and that his most important buildings (including St Albans Town Hall) “were all handsome civic buildings, and were favourably received by contemporary critics”.<sup>19</sup>

In 1814, he was appointed Surveyor to the wealthy Mercer’s Company, as well as the Coopers’ (of which he was also at one point Master). He was a Fellow of the Institute of British Architects and the Society of Antiquaries. He was elected to the Surveyors’ Club in 1807 an influential group of architects and surveyors. His most distinguished London building was probably St Paul’s School of 1823-24



St Pauls School, London

8. Lansberry, pp.92-95  
9. Le Hardy, p.198  
10. Le Hardy, p.202

11. Lansberry, pp.92-95; Le Hardy, p.223  
12. Many thanks to Olivia Horsfall Turner of the Victoria and Albert Museum for helping to trace these drawings, the catalogue items are V&A: 1324 and 1325  
13. Le Hardy, p.238, and Green, p.3

14. Le Hardy, p.225, not Keene’s Cement, which appears to have crept into the documentary record but was not actually invented until some years after completion of the Town Hall  
15. Le Hardy, p.238  
16. Lansberry, p.95



Mark Lane Corn Exchange

on Cheapside (demolished in the 1880s), which was a substantial neo-Greek building with a Corinthian portico, illustrated in Metropolitan Improvements; or London in the Nineteenth Century: . . . from *Original Drawings by Mr. Thos H. Shepherd. With historical, topographical and critical illustrations, by James Elmes, 1827*. Smith's Whittington Almshouses, Highgate, were funded by the Mercers' and demolished in the 1960s. He also built the Mercers' School in the City.<sup>20</sup>

The New Corn Exchange in Mark Lane of 1827 was another important and prestigious civic structure built to his designs, with a massive Doric colonnade and a frieze of repeated laurel wreaths, probably imitated from the frieze of the Choragic monument. Mogg's *New Picture of London and Visitor's Guide to its Sights, 1844*, described it warmly: "The Corn Exchange, Mark Lane, was erected in 1828 from designs by Mr. Smith, at an expense of 90,000l., and is a very fine specimen of time Greek Doric style of architecture.

The wholesale corn trade of the city of London is entirely conducted here; and oats, beans, and all other kinds of grain are sold by sample in this market, which is held three times a week."<sup>21</sup>

As well as these evidently prestigious commissions, Smith also designed a number of Gothic churches, including St Michael's Blackheath Park, and also railways stations for the South East Rail Company, including



Measured drawing of the Corn Exchange, Mark Lane



Aerial photo, 1963.

Greenwich and Blackheath stations – he was also responsible for a number of buildings around Greenwich. Professor Sir Albert Richardson in his *Monumental Classical Architecture in Britain and Ireland*, notably included Smith in the chapter devoted to the 20 leading neo-Greek architects, alongside William Wilkins and Robert Smirke, Decimus Burton and Lewis Vulliamy, including a measured drawing of the elevation of the New Corn Exchange.<sup>22</sup>

## The Town Hall as a Public Building

The achievement of George Smith at St Albans was to provide the Corporation and the Liberty Justices with a public building of considerable dignity and presence in a prominent central site, overlooking the marketplace, surrounded and framed by the tighter street frontages of the older town. Smith's design combined public and social requirements. He designed the building in a clever way which contrived to include two large architectural volumes, the assembly room and the court house. These two principal spaces seem even larger on the interior than the elegant and dignified exterior suggests. This is a key to Smith's architectural achievement and not atypical of the challenges that early nineteenth architects faced in providing new civic facilities in ancient town settings.

The motivation for these building projects was especially strong in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century. As Dr Simon Thurley writes, "Combining law courts with town halls was expression of civic aspiration: justice, good government and personal improvement working in harmony".<sup>23</sup> From the mid-eighteenth century there was an increasing expectation of improvement and orderliness in public and civic architecture. Town or shire halls and corn exchange buildings were increasingly being designed and built, not only to serve practical functions, but also to express a new sense of civic identity – as exemplified at St Albans.<sup>24</sup>

In the late eighteenth century, James Adam designed the new Shire Hall in Hertford, while Robert Adam designed the elegant Market Cross and theatre building in Bury St Edmunds.<sup>25</sup> Thomas Rogers's 1779-92 neo-Classical Clerkenwell Sessions' House was published in Richardson's *New Vitruvius Britannicus (1802-09)*, and John Carr of York designed

17. H.M.Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects: 1660-1840*, 2008, pp.946-948  
18. *Ibid.*, p.947  
19. *Ibid.*, p.946  
20. *Ibid.*, p.947

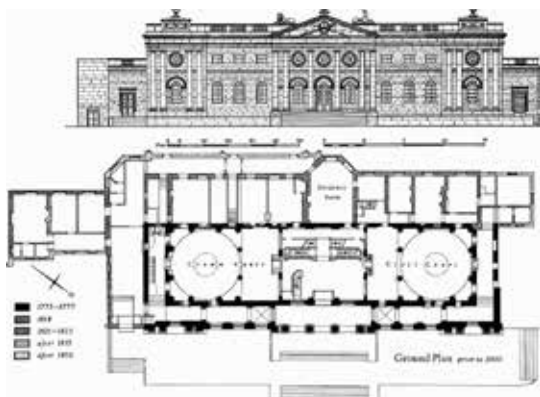
21. *Mogg's new London Guide, 1849*  
22. A.Richardson, *Monumental Classic Architecture in Great Britain and Ireland, 1914* (reprint 1982, pp.61-62).  
23. Thurley, *The Building of England, 2013*

24. Mark Girouard, *The English Town*, p.144

the assizes court at York Castle (1773-1777), which was also a model of elegant and efficient design.<sup>25</sup> Stafford Shire Hall of 1795-98 was by John Harvey, whose design was chosen over competitive submissions by Nash and Samuel Wyatt (Harvey, like George Smith, had been an assistant to James Wyatt).<sup>27</sup>



Stafford Shire Hall



Assizes Court, York Castle



Ely Shire Hall

## Development of Architectural Style

Neo-Greek was found to be a very popular style for public buildings in this era, as perceived to be especially suited to the “dignified economy” required by public bodies at the time. For example, the local 1828 Corn Exchange at Bishop’s Stortford, graced by an Ionic order by Lewis Vulliamy, must have spurred on the leading figures of St Albans to an imitation – the Bishop’s Stortford building also occupies a central and



George Smith's early design for St Albans Town Hall



Another early design for St Albans Town Hall

constricted site.

There were many interesting civic buildings where public functions were combined within a neo-Greek form, and to list just a few further comparators of similar character: Chester Castle’s court-house, gaol and armoury of 1788-1822; Glasgow’s 1810-11, designed by William Stark; Enniskillin’s Greek Doric court-house of 1821-22; the Sessions House in Bourn in Lincolnshire, of 1821, or the 1822 Ely Shire Hall (designed by Charles Humfrey) and what became Salford’s magistrates court. Smirke especially promoted the neo-Greek as “the noblest of all the styles”.<sup>28</sup>

Smith created a series of bold perspective renderings of versions in the neo-Greek style, which are in Hertfordshire Archives, that were clearly designed for presentation or even exhibition. They illustrate the dramatic possibilities

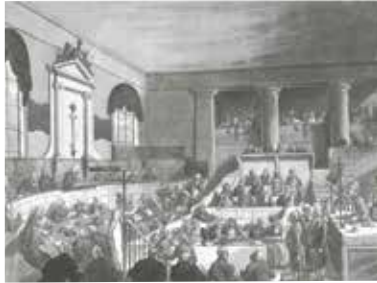
25. Stevens Curl, *Georgian Architecture in the British Isles*, 2011, pp.266-69  
26. Stevens Curl, p.267

27. *ibid*  
28. C.Graham Ordering Law, various, and J.Stevens Curl, *Georgian Architecture*, pp.266-260

of the style as imagined by the original designer, reaching towards an expression of architecture that has echoes with works in contemporary Germany by Bavarian von Klenze among others – which was to be restrained by budget.

<sup>29</sup> Interestingly, different styles were explored as well as different sets, and among the drawings in the Hertfordshire Archives are proposals in an Italianate style; and in the drawings in the Victoria and Albert Museum there is a further version in a neo-Gothic style (as part of the proposals for the Verulam Road/Lower Dagnall Street site).<sup>30</sup>

The overall principles of the layout and design of the St Albans courtroom



*Old Bailey Court Room*

structures adapted in rough and ready fashion for uses as places as trial or confinement. It is surely no accident that a legendarily aggressive new mode of barrister at criminal trials emerged so precisely in tandem with the construction of so many courtroom “theatres” now purpose built for the ‘performances’ of court officials.”<sup>31</sup>

In the main Old Bailey courtroom it is interesting to note that in 1783 “a mirror was placed directly above the defendant’s dock, contrived so as to reflect the light shining through the main windows of the court room directly upon the face of the accused” – as recorded in an 1808 Rowlandson drawing. This underlines the normal expectation in courtroom design for very clear, ample, often top-lighting – just as is found at St Albans Town Hall, where such pure and revealing light is supplied by the lantern. The lighting thus provided was thought to be an effective way of lighting the faces of the “actors” in the courtroom drama, as is indeed shown by George Smith’s evocative sectional drawing of the early design of the proposed court house at St Albans, not as executed.<sup>32</sup>



*Detail of George Smith’s cross section of St Albans Court Room*

can also be traced in some senses to the model of the Sessions House of the Old Bailey, as Simon Devereux notes, “the first of at least thirty new county courthouses built in England between 1768 and 1830, almost all of which – like the new prisons being built in the same era – were for the first time being conceived and constructed as purpose-built spaces for their specific judicial function, rather than merely rooms in timeworn country



*George Smith’s details for the elaborate frieze*



*The Town Hall as seen on market day*



*Inwood plate from a study of The Erechtheion at Athens*

<sup>29</sup> Stevens-Curl, *Classical Architecture*, 2001, p.20

<sup>30</sup> HALS, [see Purcell, 2012, Green, 2012, p.1] and London: V&A: 1324 and 1325

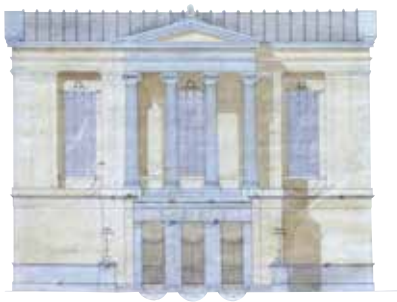
<sup>31</sup> Simon Devereux, ‘Arts of Public Performance: Barristers and Actors in Georgian England’, in David Lemmings (ed) *Crime, Court Rooms and the Public Sphere*, 2012, pp.93-188, 102

<sup>32</sup> Sectional drawing, HALS, Plan Case 1/518 reproduced in *Guide to the Hertfordshire Record Office*, Part I, 1961, pp.55-56

<sup>33</sup> Green, 2012, p.4

At St Albans, the two functions of the building complex are delineated by a shift in the architectural character (and which leads Chris Green to suggest a neo-Egyptian spirit to the Court House).<sup>33</sup> The Ionic portico of the town hall rises like a prominent temple seen from the north, which could be easily read visually above the heads of the busy market traders and punters.

Given the popularity of certain key ancient Greek buildings that were used as sources for buildings designed in the Greek manner, it is tempting to suggest that Smith may have been toying with the form of the Erechtheion, as surveyed in the 18th century by Stuart and Revett, for the Antiquities of Athens, and more recently by another prominent London architect W. H. Inwood's published study of *The Erechtheion at Athens. Fragments of Athenian Architecture and a Few Remains in Attica, Megaria and Epirus*, 1827.<sup>34</sup> The anthemion frieze detail may be taken from this latter source as inspiration for the Town Hall's assembly room and the frieze decoration within the lantern above the court room. The wreath decoration that appears within the Town Hall and on its exterior was probably also taken from the much-admired Choric monument, which also appears in the *Antiquities of Athens*.<sup>35</sup>



George Smith's 1831 drawing of the North Elevation of the Town Hall

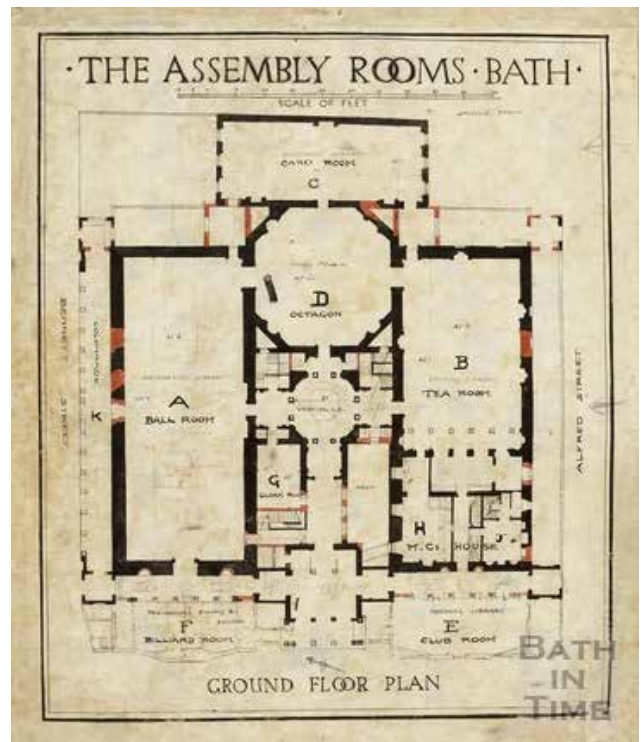


George Smith's 1831 drawing of the West Elevation of the Town Hall

## Layout and Presentation of Interior

The main public entrance to the Town Hall lies to the north, which would not have been the natural choice, but which was governed by the existing pattern and setting of the town. The south elevation could be little seen, given the narrowness of the passage on that side. The north elevation had a plain central tri-partite entrance divided by stout, but plain Tuscan piers. The north entrance was open under the Assembly Room, and a central section acted as an open foyer, framed by two screens of cast iron columns (painted stone colour) with rooms on either side (originally the Grand Jury and magistrates' room, but also used by the town council and as a reading room and for lectures). It is remarkable to think of lectures sponsored by the anti-slavery society being held in the Court House almost as soon as it is open for business.<sup>36</sup>

In 1830, the "room on the left hand side from the entrance opposite St Peter's Church in the new Court House as a fit and proper room for the use of the mayor, alderman . . . as their council chamber". Below these rooms lay a basement kitchen, pantry and wine cellar, which supported



Plan of The Bath Assembly Room

the grand entertainments of the Town Hall, which can still be discerned, although filled with modern (and redundant) mechanical servicing.

The grand entertainments are suggested by various reports in the press. In 1831 an inaugural ball was described in the *Morning Post*: "The First County Ball took place at our New Town hall on Friday last, under the immediate patronage of the Earl of Verulam, Lord Grimston,

34. W.H.Inwood, *The Erechtheion at Athens. Fragments of Athenian Architecture and a Few Remains in Attica, Megaria and Epirus*, 1827  
 35. *Ibid*  
 36. *Le Hardy*, p.259.



*The interior of the Court Room*

and J. Gape, Esq., and was attended by a numerous circle of the haut ton. Dancing commenced at eleven. Weippert's delightful Band in attendance. The refreshments and supper were of the first order.<sup>37</sup> Balls and concerts, political, recitations, and public meetings are also described regularly in the press.

In 1899, the Grand Jury room was remodelled as a Council Chamber with the enclosure of the open entrance and the removal of the wall that originally divided it from the entrance. The eastern entrance to the spine hall was remodelled, possibly in 1899. In 1975-76, the remaining partition wall was taken away as part of the creation of a new enlarged council chamber.<sup>38</sup> These rooms had coffered ceilings, now hidden or lost under a suspended ceiling. The original staircase rose on the west side of the building in a dignified but somewhat compact compartment, which was opened up and turned into a much grander affair in the 1914-15 works, by a competent designer from the County Council's own surveyor's office.<sup>39</sup>

The first floor was divided into three key spaces, including the main Assembly Room, which is a large and dramatic room (60 x 30ft) of unexpectedly large volume, filling the entire width of the Town Hall's frontage, with tall windows on three elevations, walls articulated by Doric pilasters and a compartmented ceiling of bold plasterwork features. There were two additional rooms around a landing, one of which survives little altered. The main frieze in the Assembly Room designed by Smith is unusual and free-standing, allowing for a rare shadow effect when lighted by oil, candles or even later gas. The correspondence on file with paint expert Ian Bristow suggests the original colour scheme might have been a stony pink wall colour framed between pink and grey granite pilasters – probably originally treated with a scagliola finish, as suggested by the accounts: “plasterers and plumbers work excepted but including all ‘scagliola’ work” – possibly in something faux pink-grey granite effect.<sup>40</sup>

The extreme height of the Assembly Room windows was clearly a carefully considered element in the design. For daytime events the Assembly Room would be flooded with light, and for evening functions, the pleasures of the elite at play might well be tantalizingly advertised to the world around. These large areas of glazing are in distinct contrast to the much more compact windows of the adjoining court house,



*Detail above the Judge's Bench*

which were intended to give a much more controlled and fort-like air of fortitude and impregnability. The original fenestration windows of the Assembly Room was largely replaced (apparently) in the 1914-15 works with metal windows following a similar pattern, the only earlier survival being that above the French window to the balcony.<sup>41</sup>

Assembly Rooms were popular forms in county towns in the later Georgian era – providing space for feasts and also for the balls of the type evoked so well in the novels of Jane Austen.<sup>42</sup> These largely followed the patterns established in the most fashionable and renowned Bath Assembly Room – namely a large, well-lit room with few obstructions, but with adjoining retiring rooms for ladies, tea-drinking and another for cards. In different towns and cities, different degrees of social hierarchy operated for admittance to the Assemblies.

As Mark Girouard observes: “By the end of the [eighteenth] century large numbers of such people had learnt how to behave in a ballroom, how to move and dress with elegance, and how to make conversation.” In short, “Assembly Rooms spread the gospel of politeness, a term far more emotive in the 18th century than it is today . . . Politeness was a way of breaking down barriers.” Girouard likes to call this “the gospel of Nash”, referring to the famous master of ceremonies at Bath who, according to Lady Luxmore, had set out “to promote society, good manners and a coalition of parties and ranks”. Some towns had separate assemblies for gentry and trade but, on the whole, the Assembly Room movement “served to bring people together rather than keep them apart”. Such social mores were gradually replaced in the mid-nineteenth century with “the age of the club and private ball”. This room survives relatively little altered today, with an air of ambition and magnificence immediately apparent in its volume and height. There are two original neo-Greek chimneypieces, which were altered in 1914-15 with additional shelves and fitted mirrors.<sup>43</sup> Ventilators had been added in the later nineteenth century, which in themselves hint at an active and continual usage in those years. Two additional side doors in the south wall were added in 1906 as additional fire escapes, along with an external staircase along the west wall, leading to the street.<sup>44</sup>

The Courtroom is also a dignified and handsome space, which must strike most visitors with its grave and stately qualities, as was the intention of the designer. This Courtroom belongs to a lively and

37. Purcell, 2012, pp.83-85

38. Green, p. 7

39. Ibid. p.5

40. Bristow, 2007, report by letter, SAMS files

41. Green, p.46

42. Girouard, ‘Spreading the Nash Gospel’, *Country Life*, October 2, 1986, , pp.1057-63

43. Green, p.7

44. Ibid, p.5

45. Binney, *Silence in Court*, Save Report, 2004, pp.130-131; Graham, *Ordering Law: the Architectural and Social History of the English Court to 1914*, 2003, p.317



inventive period of civic design and urban improvement; and a court in particular had to be a multifaceted space. As the leading historian of court design, Clare Graham, observes tellingly in her book: “A law court is like a Church, in that it is the setting for solemn ritual, designed to reinforce our belief in the myths that uphold society; like a theatre in that the ritual is performed as a public drama; like a school, in that this drama is intended to educate as well as entertain; like a town hall, in that the court advertises the authority of government.”<sup>45</sup>

The curved bench was increasingly preferred in this era, a “basilica-like arrangement” that helped a large number of magistrates to see and hear proceedings when necessary. The “Half Moon Table” was used by both court clerks and counsel, and fitted well with the apsidal arrangement of the bench.<sup>46</sup> The royal arms above the justice’s central seat is presumed to be fashioned in Code stone. This proprietary material was popular for court house decoration and was used for figures of mercy and justice at Canterbury; a Coade stone royal arms can also be found on the Judge’s Lodgings at Prestige and at Silsbee Sessions House.<sup>47</sup>

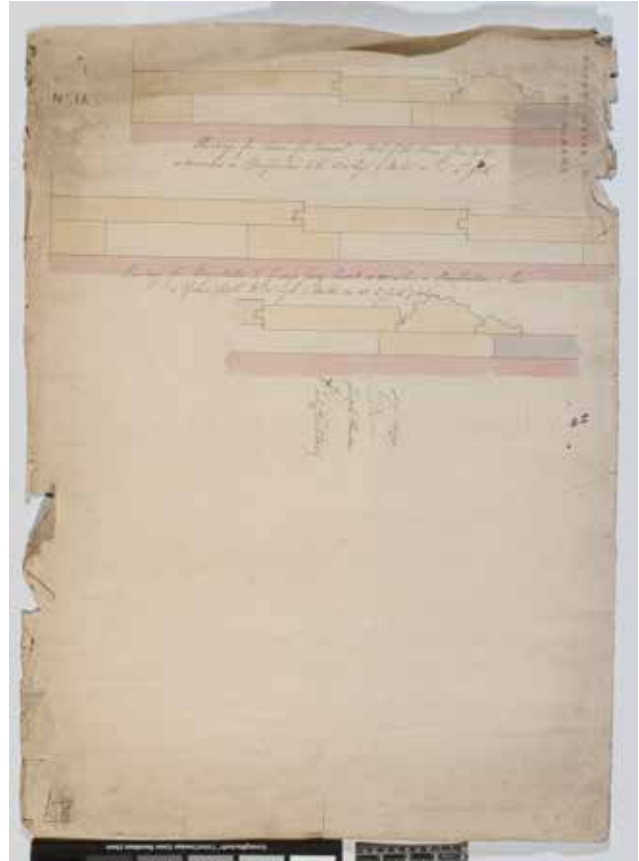
In the Sessions records of 1835, there is reference to lighting the Court Room with Gas, four lights on brass pillars along the curved bench, whereas previously wall-mounted sconces are mentioned.<sup>48</sup> Heating appears to have been a regular concern. As early as 1837 there are references to improving the warming and drying the Court House using a “Dr Arnott’s stove”.<sup>49</sup> Smith also provided designs for furniture, tables and chairs, as well as grates and chimneypieces.<sup>50</sup>

Although it is known that the timber panelling and courtroom joinery generally was decorated by a film company in the mid-1990s (possibly for the trial scene of Wilde, shown in 1997), it is interesting to note that the panelling leading up towards the dock appears to be much older, perhaps early twentieth century in date.<sup>51</sup> The courtroom was reduced in size in 1914-1915 when part of the public gallery was given over to the new grand stone staircase behind. In 1831, there are references to “matting of the court room”. According to C. Green, the lantern was adapted for ventilation in 1875, an angle “spider’s web” (probably glazed) was added in 1915; in 1875 the dock was also adapted.<sup>52</sup>



A view down the corridor to the cells

There were two supporting rooms south of the court, now adapted as the SAHAAS library and the Tourist Information Centre. South of the courtroom were originally rooms for the Petty Jury and Council and, in between them, “an engine house”, is marked on the contract drawings, which C. Green suggests may have been an aborted penal project, akin to the treadmill in the Liberty Gaol (the latter much discussed in Le Hardy, *Sessions Records*, Vol IV, 1923).<sup>53</sup> On the early



George Smith’s designs for skirting at St Albans Town Hall

plan this room could be opened to the street, perhaps with a screen of railings, or perhaps with doors. Above these rooms, now offices and TIC room, there was a caretaker’s flat that, as with the rooms below (with the exception of the south-west room, now the SAHAAS library), was radically altered during the alterations to bank use as late as 1986.<sup>54</sup>

Below the court house lie the cells. The early plans confirm that these were initially constructed as communal cells (one for men and one for women) and only later subdivided into individual cells, possibly in 1875 and certainly before 1914-15.<sup>55</sup> There are surviving doors with vented panels. Smith’s concerns about the lack of security afforded by a central site is reflected in the records. In 1835, there were references to fixing a grille to stop prisoners being passed liquor from outside.<sup>56</sup>

From the cells a tunnel passage leads theatrically towards the short steps that rise to the dock, the sensation of which is remarkable even now. Passage from the dark, shadowy cells into the brightly lit dock, under the eye of the justices’ bench, and held in by ironwork spikes around the dock, was (and remains) an awe-inspiring test of nerves. Low-level lighting was installed in 2008 to aid visitors; otherwise the cells are left uncluttered and without a use.

46. *Save Report*  
47. *Ibid.*, p.217  
48. *Ibid.*, pp.145, 145  
49. *Le Hardy*, p.271  
50. *Le Hardy*, p.235.

51. For the Wilde court scene see, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UwhYn-P7HLg>; for dating of joinery see 2015 report by David Luard  
52. *Green*, p.8 *ibid*

53. *Ibid.*, p.5  
54. *Ibid.*, p.9  
55. *Ibid.*, p.9  
56. *Le Hardy*, p.273  
57. *Bristow*, 2007



*The sandblasted walls of the cells and corridor to cells*

The walls of the cells and tunnels have, unfortunately, been sandblasted to bare rough brick in modern times (perhaps in the mid-1980s), but it is unlikely that this was how they were seen in any time until the late-twentieth century. Before that the walls were almost certainly painted, even rendered brickwork, for reasons of hygiene if nothing else.

Generally throughout the Town Hall and Court House, the colour schemes are modern and not representative of the original decorative schemes. The original colours and finishes throughout are only suggested at by the surviving specification by the painter J. Story – a typical range of familiar neo-Classical colours and finishes.<sup>57</sup> According to the specifications, the railing of the principal staircase was to be painted in imitation of bronze, the iron columns were to be “sanded” to imitate stone, the interior [woodwork?] of the town hall, courtroom and entrance hall and landing to be “extra finished branched oak imitation and twice varnished in best copal”. The Grand Jury Room, Magistrates Room, writing and two retiring rooms to be “extra flatted with the best Nottingham Lead in Tints of approved Colors”. All the “trowelled Stucco and Oil Mastic throughout to be painted five times in oil and flatted of such Colors as are to be directed”. The “Dado or plinth of the Town hall to be finished in granite and twice varnished” and the external doors to be “extra branched oak imitation”. A sectional drawing of the skirting survives among the drawings.

Ian Bristow in 2007 reported after analysis that the Assembly Room’s ceiling was painted in a “pink distemper” on a greyed white in oil. The walls beneath were “decorated in a similar pale pink colour in oil, with deeper pink wall-grounds”. The dado was probably painted as described, “imitation of granite using a series of pinks, whites, and reds worked wet-into-wet”. The gilding of the anthemion frieze is entirely modern and it is thought was either unpainted or painted in a deep cream. There is evidence of several schemes, including a green scheme, which dates to after the 1930s (according to the reminiscences of the former court reporter, Beryl Carrington).<sup>58</sup> Prof. Bristow argued that while the evidence is inconclusive, the courtroom ceiling was in a off-white, and the rusticated wall surfaces possibly in a stone colour. It was difficult to resolve what the early Georgian treatment of the furnishings was, but there is evidence of a light brown colour, possibly some darker varnished brown and subsequently a mid-century scheme of a pale green colour.

<sup>58.</sup> Beryl Carrington, ‘Court Room in Town Hall, St Albans’, undated, memories of a former court report, 1930s-60s, mss, in SAMS files

<sup>59.</sup> Bristow, 2007

<sup>60.</sup> Green, p.2

From 1831 to 1875, the Town Hall and Court House was managed by the Town Council and magistrates jointly, and then passed entirely into the management of the magistrates from 1875, and the County Council from 1880; it passed to the City Council in 1970 (now St Albans District Council). As is often the case, later alterations appear to be much less well documented. According to Chris Green and Heather Jermy, 1870s’ work was carried out by Miskin and Co., for Hertfordshire Country Council, and further work by Turner and Co.; works of 1899 and 1914-15 appear to have been carried out by the county’s own surveyors’ department. There were a further series of alterations in the 1970s, and then Roberts for SACDC, by K. Roberts, in 1986, by K. Robert and M. Cross and 2006-08, R. Darby for the SACDC, at the same time as works for the Alliance and Leicester’s formation of a banking hall on the west side.

The building considered here, and analysed further in the Significance Sections, has a clear historic and architectural value in itself and in the city of St Albans, as a public building of architectural and political ambition, and many layered function, into which were drawn the functions of law, local government, social and artistic life; the building was designed to be busy, prominent and visible. This was its *raison d’etre* and its history.



*The colour scheme in the Assembly Room*

# UNDERSTANDING

Phase plans as set out by Purcell in the St Albans Town Hall Conservation Statement, 2012

