

Notes on the Abbey Gateway, Cross, and County Hall - 17/11/2010

The abbey gateway is in a straight line with what was the west door to the abbey church, and this line leads to the site of the old yeld-hall or market hall, where the County Hall now stands.

The Gateway has been much restored, but the oldest part is the small northern pedestrian entrance which is probably of the twelfth century. On the southern side, there was a porter's lodge, which in the mid-nineteenth century was used as a police station. After the Crimean War, the angle was embellished with a commemorative cannon on a plinth. The present doorway with its grotesque carvings dates to 1869. The building immediately to its south was originally St John's Hospital, which catered to sick and needy travellers and also was an infirmary for abbey servants. At the east end of the hospital building was a chapel, which later became the borough law court. The rooms above the gateway were the town prison until the Old Gaol came into use in 1812.

The market hall was originally the property of the Abbey, and, although an essential working building, symbolised the authority of the Abbey over the town. An early hall was destroyed in an anti-Abbey riot in 1327. It stood in what was then the middle of the market place - the buildings just south and west of it are later infill. In the sixteenth century, and probably before, the building was also a courtroom. A new market hall was built in 1566. The present County Hall was completed in 1682, with the ground floor open as a covered market and the Sessions Hall above designed as a court room for county assizes and lesser sessions.

Market crosses were a normal feature of town centres in the Middle Ages, but the one that stood in the market place to the north-east of the hall was special. It had been built by the townsfolk in or about 1445, an assertion of their corporate identity as against the Abbot's authority. It was a partly octagonal, partly hexagonal structure on a plinth with eight steps all round, 57 feet (17 meters) high, and bore numerous statues of saints, biblical characters, kings and local worthies. The latter were identified by their heraldry. It was a gathering point for the population on civic occasions. Mayors and officials could preside over public ceremonial from the steps, and from them announcements and speeches could be made. It was under the cross in 1571 that there was a bloody affray between the adherents of two local gentry families, while the people crowded around cheering the combatants, and the magistrates climbed the steps to call vainly for order.

The cross was remodelled in 1605, and became famous as the most beautiful in the country excepting only the Cheapside Cross in London. But the sculptures aroused the hostility of the Puritans of the Civil War era, who regarded them as the 'graven images' that the Bible forbids. Probably the last tourist who came to see the cross, in May 1644, was a Royalist officer, Richard Symonds, and he made rapid sketches of the shields on it. Just three weeks later, the Parliamentary army under the extreme puritan Waller captured the town and the cross was pulled down.