

NOTES ON THE TOWN HALL

The present town hall dates from 1814 when it was originally built with an open ground floor area where some of the market stalls were located. The architect is unknown but the building was constructed at the expense of our two MPs (this was prior to the Reform Act of 1842 which did away with 'rotten boroughs' whereby all sorts of political chicanery was indulged – see the blue plaque outside the Poachers Pocket for a little more info).

The town hall was built on a small area of open land south of the old market hall which had been in existence for many years and was by then in a ruinous state. The old butchers' shambles was near the old market hall too. The distinctive T shape of the town has been evident since the first records of the place in 1220 and the area formed the town's 'market square'.

In one corner of the open ground floor was a lock-up where any person causing a public nuisance could be detained pending further official action.

The upper room was used for town meetings, Sunday school and other community activities. A little later – in 1842 according to a commercial directory, the market was in decline and there being no need for a sheltered area for stalls, the ground floor was walled in and the upper floor removed to create a single large open space which was used as a school room. At that time the population was only 849, at which date there were two schools in the town.

At the end of the 19th century, a proper system of local government was introduced (under the Local Government Act of 1888) and there was thus a need for a council chamber and an office for the clerk. At that time a first floor was re-created and the building modernised by the addition of a public lavatory in one of the two small 'pavilions' now in existence at the front of the building.

That work was paid for by Mr J Stewart Hodgson, of Lythe Hill, one of the town's great benefactors. A memorial plaque to his wife is on the front of the town hall.

Adjacent to that plaque is a smaller one commemorating the life of Sir Robert Hunter 1844 - 1913 the principal founder of the National Trust who lived in Three gates Lane.

The town hall was extensively re-furbished about 6 years ago with a strengthened upper floor, new WC, offices created and the zinc ceiling in the council chamber repaired and restored.

Another plaque on the wall of the TH recalls the death of Inspector Donaldson killed by navvies in 1855 (they were building the railway which opened in 1859) after a drunken brawl outside the White Horse hotel. He was the first Surrey police officer to be killed on duty.

Robert Serman
(Robert is the President of the Haslemere Society)