

Old Town Hall Faringdon

A Brief History

The Old Town Hall, or Old Market House to give it its more accurate name, is a mid-to-late 17th century building that was constructed in an established tradition whereby an open market hall was formed underneath a first-floor chamber reached by a simple staircase. Funded by public subscription, it was built during the Restoration period and is one of only two remaining municipal halls from the Stuart period in the Vale of White Horse, the other being the County Hall in Abingdon-on-Thames.

Compared to the magnificent structure in Abingdon, Faringdon's Hall is charmingly unsophisticated. Its simple Tuscan style stone pillars support a framework of massive oak beams which in turn carry a traditional timber-framed structure with lathe and plaster walls under a hipped stone tiled roof. This form was generally adopted so that the chamber could be used for the communal business of the town while the space below formed the sheltered area where farm produce would be sold on market days. The upper floor also hosted the Magistrates Court while conveniently located below in one corner of the ground floor was the first purpose-built town jail, known as The Blind House. This, it seems, was a tiny cell whose only light came from a very small grating in the door, in which those accused of more serious offences were incarcerated, sometimes for weeks at a time, until their cases could be heard by the visiting Magistrate. Later, a larger but very ugly brick lockup was constructed against the Hall's western side and when, in 1858, a proper Police Station was built on the eastern edge of the town, it was used as a store room. It was eventually pulled down in 1919 during the Hall's restoration.

Over the years the ground floor lost its original use and was fenced in to become a store for the hurdles needed for the regular livestock markets. Eventually, following the opening of the Cottage Hospital in the 1890s, one bay at the eastern end was enclosed to house the Hospital's 'ambulance' which was in fact the church bier whose main purpose was to take bodies from the hospital morgue to the church! Then from 1905 to 1918 the Hall also served as the town's fire station with the fire engine being garaged in the bay adjacent to the ambulance, fire-hoses being dried on a rack constructed on the south side of the building and a bell to summon the crew erected over the ridge of the roof.

The Market House, together with most of the other buildings in the Market Place, formed part of the manorial rights of the town and so it came into the ownership of Lord Berners when he purchased Faringdon House and Estate in 1919 to become Lord of the Manor of Great Faringdon. However, as it was in a poor state of repair he declined to take possession of the Hall and consequently it was decided that the only solution was to demolish the building, a conclusion that horrified William Morris's daughter, May, who was then living at Kelmscott Manor and very active in the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings that had been founded by her father. Following her intervention a committee was appointed which attracted sufficient money from public subscriptions for the building to be renovated expressly so that, with the addition of a suitable tablet listing the names of those killed in action, it would become Faringdon's Memorial to the Fallen of the Great War. After World War Two the names of the town's dead from that conflict were added and it has remained as the town's war memorial, probably the only building to be designated as such. It was given Listed Building status in 1958.

A charitable trust was set up in 1921 to maintain the memorial and administer the building which allowed it to be put to a variety of public service uses including being requisitioned by the War Office, a long period as the town's public library and use by the local Red Cross branch as a charity shop.

In 1994 the Town Council was asked and agreed to take over trusteeship of the building. Then in 2000 it undertook a major refurbishment of the structure since when it has been used as a public meeting room for local clubs and societies.

An interesting surviving architectural feature is an iron strap set into one pillar that is said to have been where convicted wrongdoers were tied to be whipped. This is a plausible explanation because a whipping post was a common feature in 17th century towns and was usually found in the market place adjacent to the stocks which do appear to have been situated alongside the Hall.