

Braintree Town Hall

A History and Description of Braintree Town Hall



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LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN THE BRAINTREE DISTRICT

Local Democracy Week is a campaign run by the Local Government Association. It takes place in October each year and is aimed at encouraging young people to take a greater interest in what the Council does.

Braintree District Council has promoted Local Democracy Week for the last two years, working with several secondary schools across the District to highlight the ways that young people can get involved in democracy. This year, the Council will again be hosting the event and has chosen to launch Local Democracy Week 2008 with a celebration of the 80th anniversary of Braintree Town Hall.

A gift from William Julien Courtauld, Braintree Town Hall was opened on 22nd May 1928. In the speech made on behalf of William Julien Courtauld by the Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, it was stated that “***there should be in this town something by way of a building that would be a record in the history of the town and a starting point for greater municipal work. That was Mr Courtauld’s object in giving this handsome Town Hall.***”

The opening marked a new chapter in the history of local democracy for Braintree. On Saturday 9th June 1928, Mr and Mrs Courtauld welcomed members of the Braintree Urban District Council to the Town Hall. In the Council’s first meeting at the Town Hall, the Council recorded a note of thanks to the Courtaulds for their immense generosity and then proceeded with the remaining business on the agenda, namely the sale of land for the siting of a new Post Office in Braintree.

Over the last 80 years, the nature of council business may well have changed but local democracy continues to play a major role in the prosperity and well-being of the District. This commemorative programme has been produced to highlight some of the defining moments and to also act as a guide for guests attending the launch at the Town Hall.

Chairman of the Council

History

Originally, the business of the town was conducted in the old Vestry Hall in St. Michael's Lane, Braintree, but in the 1920s, the idea of building a purpose-built town hall was proposed and the historic site in the old Market Place was selected. The building was the gift of William Julien Courtauld who wanted to create a grand civic building to raise the standard of local values both in architectural building and artistic expression.

The foundation stone was laid by Mr G.T.T. Bartram on 16 October 1926 at a ceremony attended by a large audience. The building was designed by E. Vincent Harris who was told by Courtauld that "I only want the best" and the architect certainly provided that.

Vincent Harris was an eminent architect who designed city halls and public buildings in Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Exeter and many other places. Shortly after the completion of Braintree's Town Hall, he was chosen to design the government offices at Whitehall, the largest single building in the country to have been built for some 50 years.

The original estimate was in the region of £10,000 but by its completion, this figure had risen to well over £50,000. The foundations, floor and roof were constructed of reinforced concrete and therefore make the building an early example of the use of this material.

Originally, Winston Churchill MP was asked to perform the opening ceremony in the Market Square but instead it was undertaken by The Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, a distinguished artist and politician. After speeches, The Earl of Crawford, Mr G.T. Bartram, Vincent Harris and the Bishop of Chelmsford left the dais and crossed to the new Town Hall where they appeared on the balcony. The Earl of Crawford declared the Town Hall open with the words "I now declare this building open, and dedicate it to the good government and prosperity of your ancient town of Braintree". A special Braintree flag was then hoisted on the Town Hall. Colonel Edward Ruggles-Brise, the local Member of Parliament, proposed thanks to the Earl and stated that in 100 years time, he thought that Braintree would have risen in prominence to become a city and that a Guildhall would then be needed. The party then retired to the Institute for lunch during which Mr Courtauld was presented with a gold casket thanking him for his generosity. The gift was the result of 1,703 townspeople contributing their sixpences and shillings to thank him for his kind gesture. The casket is beautifully ornamented with the Courtauld coat of arms, the town arms and a view of the Town Hall.

The new Town Hall soon gained the prominence that it deserved and became the centre of civic life with the first banquet being held on 30th June 1931. The original interior décor was further enhanced with the addition of the fine ceiling murals painted in the principal rooms. All of these works of art perfectly complement the rich wood panelling and Portland stone used in the building. The Town Hall survives and flourishes to this day as a testament to the generosity of the Courtauld family as well as reflecting the civic pride and artistic expression of the 1920s.

The Staircase



The Window

The impressive stained glass window on the staircase was created by George Kruger Gray (1880-1943). The window shows the arms of Braintree Urban District Council at the top as a banner mounted on a pole held by a female figure. The figure has upon her head a crown made of symbolic architectural panels. The figure is standing on a verdant base with flowers and the parish church of St Michael's on the left-hand side. Kruger Gray's signature consisted of a painted German pot called a 'Krug'. Kruger Gray produced several stained glass windows including commissions for the Royal Academy of Arts, Manchester Central Library, Kings School Canterbury and the Freemasons Hall in Great Queen Street in London. Kruger Gray worked extensively with Vincent Harris, the architect of the Town Hall.

Wrought Iron Work

The wrought iron work in the entrance hall and on the staircase was carried out by the well known firm of Wippell. Ornamental gates were also erected at the rear of the Town Hall.

On either side of the main staircase are two plaques. One depicts a sheaf of wheat and a plough and represents the part played by agriculture in Braintree's history and the other shows a skein of wool with a shuttle in the centre surrounded by blacksmith's tools. This represents the hugely significant part played by the wool and silk industries together with metal work which was so successfully developed in Braintree, particularly by the firm of Crittall Metal windows.

Both plaques are encircled with beautiful arrays of flowers and fruit.

The Portraits

The two portraits on the staircase show men closely connected with Braintree and the Town Hall – William Julien Courtauld and George Bartram.

William Julien Courtauld

William Julien Courtauld donated the Town Hall to the town of Braintree. The painting by Maurice Greiffenhagen RA (1862-1931) shows Courtauld in a characteristic modest pose. It was donated by the wife of the subject, Mrs. Cicely Courtauld, in 1928 on the completion of the Town Hall. The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1929.

George Bartram

George Bartram was a prominent figure in the life of Braintree and was instrumental with William Julien Courtauld in getting the Town Hall built. He was the first Chairman of the Council to occupy the new Town Hall in 1928 and accepted the gift of the building on behalf of the inhabitants of Braintree. He also laid the foundation stone for the building in 1927. The portrait was painted by Maurice Greiffenhagen. It was originally presented by 1400 friends of Bartram in Braintree and Essex in recognition of fifty years of public service between 1879 and 1929. The portrait shows Bartram sitting at his desk in the Chairman's Room of the Town Hall with the Chairman's gavel at his side. At the base of the portrait is the OBE awarded to George Bartram in 1937. The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1930 and subsequently at other prominent galleries.

The Chairman's Room



History

The Chairman's Room was the principal office of the Town Hall and housed the Chairman of the Council. Its first occupant was George Bartram in 1928 and he spent eight years as Chairman. The room is connected to the adjacent Council Chamber by a concealed panelled door. Included in the original fixtures and fittings are Upchurch Pottery vases and fine furniture that still exist.

Paintings

Originally, the Chairman's Room had an undecorated ceiling but the prestige of the building demanded that a fine painted ceiling was commissioned soon after the Town Hall opened. The paintings were completed by Sir Henry Rushbury RA in 1937. The main ceiling is principally decorated in a scheme of blue and gilt and shows a richly emblazoned map of the County of Essex. From the centre boss are arranged the points of the compass along with the glowing colours of the Royal Arms, Arms of the See of Chelmsford, the Essex Regiment and those of Braintree itself. This is surrounded by the signs of the zodiac. The design reflects maps of the Elizabethan period. On the lower coxes of the ceiling, figures representing the four seasons are portrayed along with the fruits and skies appropriate to the season portrayed. Beneath is a cornucopia with lines from James Thompson's 'Seasons'. The main colouring of blue and gold was chosen to blend perfectly with the rich colouring of the walnut panelling.

Panelling

The panelling in the Chairman's Room reflects the prestige of its resident. It is panelled throughout in solid walnut and is further enriched by a carved Georgian doorway and cornice.

The Council Chamber



The Council Chamber at the time of its completion in 1928

History

The Council Chamber is the principal room of the Town Hall and was used for its first Council meeting in 1928 and hosted its inaugural banquet on 30 June 1931. The Council Chamber remained at the centre of civic life in Braintree for over fifty years and many a drama took place within its walls.

Panelling

The panelling in the Council Chamber is of the finest oak inlaid with holly. The furniture is of particular note with heavy oak formal tables and chairs bearing a coat of arms on their backs. The Chairman's throne has arms carved with rams' heads as a symbol of strength and the back finials are carved with the heads of owls – a pagan symbol of wisdom. Should the Chairman's strength and wisdom not prevail, he was equipped with a heavy gavel depicting the Braintree Coat of Arms and with the Bocking dolphin cunningly carved onto the handle.

Paintings

The Council Chamber's vaulted ceiling was blank at the opening but was decorated with a series of important frescoes painted by Maurice Greiffenhagen RA between 1929-30. They are painted onto copper plates which were afterwards fixed to the walls. This method was believed to ensure the permanence of the painting and also enabled the work to be done in the artist's London studio. When the decision to paint frescoes was first considered, it was decided that they should portray various scenes from Braintree's past. Greiffenhagen chose the subjects himself to ensure that they offered the most potential from an artistic point of view. Greiffenhagen was a versatile artist much influenced by Whistler.



This mural is a figurative painting of a Roman Emperor, and represents an allusion to the march of the Roman Army through Braintree to the conquest of Colchester. The straight Roman roads to London and St. Albans which intersect at Braintree, made it an important place for travellers, and many Roman remains have been found in the area.

Battle of Maldon image

This mural shows the Battle of Maldon fought in 991AD between the Danes and the Saxon inhabitants under Earl Brihtnoth. During the battle many men from Braintree fought under Aetheric who was the local chieftan and resided at Bocking Hall. The Danes had sailed up the River Blackwater to Northey Island where the battle took place. In the mural Aetheric is shown leading his Company and two of his soldiers are seen holding the unusual "seaxes" which now figure on the Essex Coat of Arms.



This painting shows that Braintree has always been at the centre of agricultural life in the district even before the granting of the market charter in 1199. The painting shows ploughing and sowing in Saxon times. The figures were taken from a manuscript illustrated by a monk a few years before the Norman Conquest. The farmer is guiding the plough and a bare-footed serf is using the ox-goad.



This mural shows King John presenting to the Bishop of London, who was Lord of the Manor of Braintree, a charter authorising the holding of a weekly market and an October fair in the town. The Bishop received generous tolls for the holding of these events. This charter was important as it made Braintree the centre of a large agricultural district. Weekly markets have been held ever since, close to the site of the Town Hall.



This mural shows Braintree in the reign of Queen Mary when protestants were being persecuted including death by burning and confiscation of property. William Pygot was a butcher denounced as being a protestant. He was arrested and sentenced to be burnt at the stake and the sentence was carried out on the site of the Town Hall on 28th March 1555. The painting shows Pygot chained to the stake and surrounded by faggots which are to be lit from the nearby brazier. Priests are trying to get him to renounce his faith at the last moment. The Sheriff's officer has just read the warrant; the soldiers of Chancellor Rich, who had brought Pygot that morning from Leez Priory, are holding back the townspeople with their pikes.



This mural reminds us that weaving was a prominent trade in Braintree and Bocking. Around 1570, Flemish immigrants brought superior new methods of weaving into the district. By the end of the eighteenth century, this had changed from wool to silk which was introduced to the town by the Courtaulds. The weaving of silk and other cloths continued throughout much of the twentieth century. The painting shows women weaving at a handloom and men working in the dye house.



This mural shows the sailing of the 'Braintree Company' aboard the 'Lyon' for New England in 1632. They landed at Boston on 12th September and founded a town close by in Massachusetts that they named Braintree. The 'Braintree Company' consisted of many local Puritans as well as people from further afield in Essex. The preaching of Thomas Hooker had persuaded many men and women to leave England and he is shown in the painting wishing Godspeed to Dr William Goodwyn of Bocking, the leader of the company. Behind him is shown John Bridge from Braintree who has been commemorated by a statue at Cambridge, Massachusetts. Hooker followed these settlers to North America four years later.



This portrait shows John Ray the famous naturalist who was probably the most eminent man that Braintree and the adjoining parishes have ever produced. He was born in Black Notley in 1628 and frequently visited Braintree to see his friend Dr Benjamin Allen who lived in a house in Great Square that is now the Constitutional Club.

On the ground floor, in addition to the imposing entrance and staircase there are offices, meeting rooms and a gallery used for exhibitions and displays.

? use photo of gallery on page 13 of The Town Hall Centre

In recent times the Town Hall has been kept up to date with modern facilities including a lift, suitable for wheelchair users, and toilet facilities for disabled people.

The Committee Rooms

North Committee Room (now called Room 1)

The panelling in the North Committee Room is in Australian Bean Wood. This wood is rarely seen as it is very hard and brittle and therefore very difficult to work and carve. The panels and grain of the wood used in this room have been greatly admired by many visitors.

South Committee Room

The room is panelled in Pear Wood and has a painted ceiling. The decoration includes a framed painting of the colours of the Essex Regiment and records the battles in which it was engaged during the First World War.

The Exterior

The Essex Chronicle, in its report of the opening ceremony, stated on 25 May 1928, "The Town Hall is totally unlike any other building in Braintree – stately, ornate and even grand in architecture and design, with internal fittings and fixtures of the most elaborate and costly description and it is intended to lead to the realisation of greater ambition in Braintree affairs."

The exterior of the building, in the Georgian style, is faced with narrow sand-faced English red bricks and the architectural character has been dictated by the traditional work of the neighbourhood. Originally the window frames were oak but these were later painted with white paint.

Turret Clock and Bells

A special feature of the exterior of the Town Hall is the fine open tower with its chiming clock, below which on the west side, can be seen the Braintree coat of arms.

The five bells of the clock tower were made by Gillett and Johnston of Croydon and vary in weight from 3 cwt for the smallest to 33 cwt for the largest bell which has a very deep tone. The smaller four bells play the Westminster Chimes and the largest bell strikes the hours. When the bells were cast at the foundry, they were christened by the Prince and Princess Reginald de Croy and Mr. and Mrs. W.J. Courtauld. The ceremony involved throwing silver coins into the molten metal. The largest bell is named "Constance Cicely", after Mrs. Courtauld.

The decorated leaden drain pipes are dated 1927.

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