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**Envy of Kings:
The Guildhall of London and the
 Power of the Medieval Corporation**

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There are very few secular buildings in England that after 600 years are still used for broadly speaking their original purpose. This, ladies and gentlemen, is one of them. Although it was started in 1411, it incorporated parts of two previous guildhalls, the first one dating back to the 1120s.

This first Guildhall probably looked a little like the great Hall of Oakham castle in Rutland built in the 1180s a rare surviving early hall and this is the fine reconstruction of it and its surroundings published by MoLAS in 2007. It was while this building was standing that the city’s powers were crystallized and it won its treasured judicial and political privileges from the Crown as well as its first Mayor.

I am not going to dwell on this tonight for the story that I want to focus on starts in 1298 as it was probably then that the idea to create a new civic centre was hatched. The initial impetus may have been to build a civic chapel but by 1330s there was also the intention to rebuild the Guildhall. This needed a wealthy sponsor and it is likely to have found it in Sir John Pulteney, a financier who, thanks to a shrewd financial nose, became one of the richest men in England. Today he is best remembered for his house Penshurst Place, Kent begun by in 1338-49. At the heart of this was a magnificent great hall, very much today as Pulteney left it. Penshurst and Pulteney were as grand as it got and, if you want to envisage the second Guildhall, take a train to Penshurst and enjoy its unspoilt magnificence.

The new Guildhall was more sophisticated than its predecessor and reflected the increasing complexity of city government. In its undercroft which survives and you can visit it, probably met the court of hustings and above in the main hall met the common council and the mayor’s court. But the new Guildhall was not just a building – it was a district, or to give it a better technical term: it was a precinct. The first Guildhall had stood alone; the new one was defined by gatehouses and 7ft high walls walls. It had no façade to the street, no real visibility to the outside world; it was completely hedged in by houses, shops and other buildings.

You could argue that this was for security as medieval London was a turbulent place, but a 7ft high wall was unlikely to deter any serious rioter. In fact the Guildhall was far from being alone; London, at this date, was a city of precincts, in all more than 20 religious institutions were set in walled enclosures, just like the modern cathedral closes. Today when you visit Canterbury you are almost unaware that the cathedral is there as you walk the narrow streets. You eventually stumble on a gatehouse and only entering this do you discover the awe-inspiring sight of the cathedral.

Within the Guildhall precinct there was a magnificent chapel, probably built by the king’s own craftsmen. To this was added in 1356 a chantry college of five priests. That is to say a chapel staffed with a residential corpus of priests saying mass for the souls of the dead. This was not a mini-monastery, it was more life a life or should I say death insurance policy for the Aldermen of the City.

In addition to the chapel there was a hall used as the main market for woollen cloth – London’s principal export. All these buildings were probably set in fine gardens with trees and flowers. This precinct was the civic, economic and judicial hub of the city. Here is Molas’s reconstruction showing it the fourteenth century.

The largest of all the London precincts was St. Paul’s, home to perhaps 300 people, as many as a small city parish. The city government rather resented the independence of this large enclave, but it was strongly defended by the bishop and dean. But St. Paul’s is not, I think, the most appropriate parallel for the guildhall precinct; the place that the Guildhall looked to was more ambitious: it was Westminster Palace.

Westminster was, of course, the principal royal palace of England and had been since the reign of Edward the Confessor. At its heart was the great hall started by William Rufus in 1097. This was the ceremonial throne room of the kingdom and, like the Guildhall, contained law courts that sat in the symbolic presence of the king’s marble throne on a dais at the high end of the hall. The palace was set in a walled precinct with a massive gate on the north and an inner gate that led to the royal palace. This is a view by Wenceslaus Hollar that shows the massive entrance gate, a huge bell tower built by Edward III, and the fountain head which, at coronations, was linked to a wine filled cistern in the clock tower and made to flow with claret. Like the Guildhall precinct this was neither a religious nor domestic zone, it was a civic, judicial and ceremonial space.

Between about 1411 and 1450 the city drove a campaign of civic improvements the star of which was a new guildhall built by the mason John Croxtone and commissioned by Lord Mayor Richard Whittington. This is the hall that survives to this very day preserving in its western half the undercroft of the old building. This room when completed was the second largest secular space in England. Only Westminster Hall was larger. It is nearly 50 m long and 17 and a half m wide. It was an engineering feat indeed to cover it and as far as we know the roof was supported on vast stone arches.

Inside there were daises at each end where courts could be held. On the north side was the entrance to the most important court, for the mayor; in a separate building, at the back of this was a smaller court room for the Aldermen. It is interesting that most of the really important rooms were rebuilt smaller, warmer and more comfortable while the great hall was built bigger, without any form of heating. Why didn’t Croxtone simply build smaller courtrooms for these too? Herein lies the importance of what was being built. Because the Croxtone’s Guildhall was no ordinary building it was a deeply traditional structure steeped in rich symbolism.

You see great halls are the key building unit of English architecture from the Saxons until after the civil war. Long before the Normans conquered England the great hall was the centre of gravity of life for the rich, their families and retinues. But what the Normans were to do was build one hall that was to change the rules. This was the hall built at Westminster palace by William the Conqueror’s son, William Rufus. Rufus’s hall stood as the great royal throne room until in 1393 Richard II decided to modernise it, a project that was completed by 1401. The massive Norman walls were retained and Richard’s masons inserted big new gothic windows in them. Beneath was a cornice richly carved with Richard’s heraldic beasts. The Norman roof was replaced with the largest and most important piece of carpentry in Western Europe a spectacular hammer beam roof.

On each hammer beam was a massive angel holding the arms of England, the roof was thus a representation of the heavens spread over the earthly court of Richard II. This was not the only religious connotation of the hall for on the south wall, behind the dais, were six rich niches containing figures of kings rather like cathedral pulpitum, as at York minster, for instance. The entrance façade was also treated like a cathedral or great abbey with two towers clad with a screen of twenty-seven niches containing statues of kings and queens. King Richard’s Westminster Hall, uniquely in English medieval architecture, sought equivalence of status with the most important religious buildings, a comment on his conception of kingship.

If William Rufus’s hall was influential, Richard’s hall was mesmerising. And as Dick Whittington and his architect contemplated the new Guildhall this is where they looked. Unquestionably it provided the model. But the Guildhall and its courts were again part of a larger and more ambitious plan that included rebuilding the guildhall chapel and college buildings and building a new library. The library was paid for by the executors of Richard Whittington and probably looked a bit like Fromond’s Chantry, the library built at Winchester College in 1425-46. Then there was the new chapel which, like the Guildhall itself took 20 years. This is Caroline Barron’s reconstruction of Guildhall and chapel as drawn by terry Ball, and here is Molas’s reconstruction of the whole precinct as existing by 1450.

London merchants were highly cosmopolitan and would have seen civic halls in the cities with which they traded. They would have been very aware that these were show pieces advertising the splendour of the town corporations in which they were built. The palazzo Publico in Sienna begun in the 1290s and completed in 1344 faced onto the main square of the city. This is exactly what the great town halls of Flanders and Brabant did: the Bruges Hotel de Ville built 1376 to 1420; more-or-less exactly contemporary with the London Guildhall dominates the city square as does the Brussels Hotel de ville, extended in 1444-55 but first built in 1402-20.

When we look at other medieval guildhalls built in England we see nothing remotely as grand. English towns were nothing like as rich and their guildhalls are generally a poor lot compared to their direct trading partners across the channel. However Norwich, England’s second largest city for much of the middle ages, and which was granted incorporation in 1404, immediately set to build itself a Guildhall. The merchants of the city traded with the cities of northern Europe and the Hanseatic League and were well aware of what a city hall should look like. The medieval Norwich Guildhall is, after London, the largest and most impressive, and like its continental cousins it sits on the main market square making, in an English way, as big a splash as it could.

It is impossible to believe that if Richard Whittington and his fellow Aldermen had wanted a show building like Bruges, or even Norwich, that they would not have built one - they could have bought up neighbouring land or swapped land to gain a street frontage – they could have even given London a central square, like most other leading trading centres. But the new London Guildhall wasn’t an excuse for not having built something that looked like Bruges, it sought to achieve a completely different effect.

Size was important; on a European scale the London Guildhall was big. Here is the Palais de Justice in Rouen started in 1499, spectacular, public and with a hall exactly the same size at the London Guildhall. So it was not size that the London Guildhall lacked, it was showmanship. English medieval buildings are interested in show but they rely on surprise and confinement rather than simple visual excess. English cathedrals, for instance, are always set in closes; continental ones are set squarely in the middle of towns in public squares. But this tradition is not enough to explain why the London Guildhall is so reticent building compared to say, Bremen a Hansiatic town with which it traded.

To get closer to why the Guildhall looked as it did, we need to consider the English love of processions. When you look at English public and ceremonial architecture before around 1700 you will see that the English always preferred entourage to architecture. Magnificent dress, velvets, pearls, laces, horse trappings, banners, trumpets and above all an extravagant number of attendants were the stuff of English royal and civic pageantry. In England architectural show always came second to personal display.

The medieval streets of London were not just functional arteries for conveying people and goods. They were also ceremonial routes, the pathways for religious and civic processions that studded the calendar. Central to this was the concept of the precinct and the linkages between them. The clergy at St. Paul’s would process round their precinct on the feast days of the year and during Whit week there were huge diocesan wide processions around the city. Likewise the royal judges would process to Westminster Hall every day during the legal term. Here is Cardinal Wolsey as Lord Chancellor processing from his house York Place through the palace gateway to the court of Star Chamber in Westminster Palace. But I think the really interesting processions are those that linked the precincts together.

So for instance the mayor, sheriffs and aldermen would process from the Guildhall to St. Paul’s and back on Christmas Day and seven other major feast days each year. From the 12th century monarchs too would process from Westminster to St. Paul’s which they regarded as the great public arena for public royal pomp and spectacle. On 28th October all three great London precincts were linked as the newly elected mayor would ride from the Guildhall to Westminster Palace to take the oath at the exchequer and then ride to St Paul’s to offer prayers before returning to the Guildhall.

But although a love of entourage gets us closer to understanding the Guildhall it does not quite get us all the way because there is also the issue of status and precedence. Other than members of his own family, the only one of his subjects with whom monarchs ever dined in state was the Mayor of London. The Mayor enjoyed exceptional status within the city: everyone other than the king himself had to give way to him there. Even the brothers of King Henry V were forced to sit next to the Mayor in the city and not above him. Matthew Philip, who was Mayor in 1463-4 walked out of a banquet given in his honour by the King’s sergeants because the Earl of Worcester was accorded precedence. He went straight home and sat down to such a massive feast that the sergeants, who by then had turned up to apologise, were first dazzled then embarrassed, horrified and ashamed.

These facts would not have been lost on Richard Whittington nor on John Carpenter the common clerk of the city and Whittington’s close friend and executor. The Common Clerk was the permanent paid officer of the city in charge of the secretariat and record keeping and Carpenter was responsible for compiling something known as the Liber Albus a compendium of law and custom within the city of London. So, as Whittington and Croxtone embarked on the reconstruction of the Guildhall precinct they would have been very aware that they were dealing with a grouping of ceremonial buildings that were to be used by an office second only to the monarch himself.

Just as the Mayor was King in his little kingdom, the square mile, so the Guildhall was to be his palace. This is why I suggest Whittington, Carpenter and Croxtone all looked to Westminster. Both had huge great halls containing courts, both had chapels, both had a college of priests, both were walled, both were entered by two gatehouses and both entrance facades conveyed messages about the nature of power. No other civic building in the land was so endowed. The Guildhall complex was a deliberate and direct recreation of Westminster Palace.

But there is a difference and to understand this we must look at one part of the Guildhall that I have not yet mentioned: the porch. This structure faced Guildhall Yard, it was the public face of England’s wealthiest Corporation, and it looked it. The whole surface was covered by blank arcading and niches containing four-foot high statues. At the top was Christ in majesty, below, on the next level, figures representing law and learning and then, flanking the archway, four female figures representing the virtues of discipline, justice, fortitude, temperance, trampling vice beneath their feet.

If you remember I said that Richard II had covered his great hall with figures too, but for Richard there were two messages that he was emphasising: first that he was chosen by God to rule and the second conveyed by the statues outside the hall that his blood could be traced back to the Confessor. For the mayor there was a different message. God was at the top, yes, but beneath God was learning and the law upon which the city government had to rely. The figures below that were messages to the Mayor, he needed discipline justice, fortitude and temperance to exercise his office.

During the Great Fire both St. Paul’s and the Guildhall were damaged but not destroyed. The Guildhall, as we know, was repaired, the cathedral rebuilt. And both lost their precincts. St. Paul’s is the only one of the historic cathedrals that now does not have a close. It sits in the city like a continental cathedral a civic monument. Exactly the same thing happened to the Guildhall. We do not know for certain who was in charge of the reconstruction work there, but it is likely to have been Sir Christopher Wren and Robert Hook. Away went the gatehouses, away went a corner of St Lawrence Jewry and several other buildings and in their stead a new forecourt was built.

This was an entirely new look for the Guildhall, for the first time it presented its face to the public. Wren and Hook looked to a new model of public building that started to be built after the fire; to the architect John Webb’s Plan for Greenwich Palace where the facades were open to the river. Or to The Royal Hospital Chelsea which actually had colonnades like the new building at the guildhall. The porch was made symmetrical and to fill the façade of the new courtyard. This was a new generation of public buildings that showed themselves to the world.

But of course it was a compromise, just like the interior of the great hall in the Guildhall itself. It was half medieval half modern, but the guildhall had again followed the royal lead. Inspired by French Models, especially Versailles Wren and Charles II wanted to create a great new palace based on a series of receding forecourts and this is what the Guildhall was given in miniature.

Under Charles II, England was, of course, a trading nation and London was a big and important European city – but what was to happen after 1700 changed everything. London overtook Paris as the largest city in Europe and after a century of economic growth and technological innovation the Royal Navy smashed the French Fleet at the battle of Trafalgar. Suddenly Britannia, in the words of Thomas Arne’s Opera, Alfred, Ruled the Waves. It was not only capital and goods that flooded into the Port of London it was inspiration and imagination, it was exoticism and new architectural styles.

The painter, William Hodges, with the encouragement of Warren Hastings the first Governor-General of Bengal, published a series of views of Indian buildings in 1785-8 and from 1795 Thomas Daniell published Oriental Scenery, 144 acquaints based on their extensive travels in India including Mughal, Hindu and medieval monuments. In 1803 the British finally occupied Delhi, the capital of the collapsing Mughal Empire, giving access by tourists to the great monuments in its vicinity including Agra, which the Daniells and others had not been able to see.

All this had a great effect on both architects and patrons. Architects were suddenly presented with new stylistic opportunities and patrons were able to display their taste and knowledge by using new styles. The City Corporation was the first to seize the opportunity to use the new Hindoo style at the Guildhall. Their architect, George Dance, was commissioned to reconstruct the decaying Guildhall Porch and building on its fifteenth century foundations he concocted a new structure that was actually based on some of the examples published by Hodges.

Of course this was an example of eclecticism, but it was also a self-conscious choice. By 1788 London was unequivocally the centre of world trade and goods and capital flowed back and forth from the Indian sub-continent. The new porch, with its exotic references to India, showed that the City was not a parochial or provincial economic force, but a global trading power.

What is interesting about this is that at the same time the Corporation also commissioned from Dance a new room for the meeting of the Court of Common Council. This is what it looked like, it was tragically demolished in 1908, but when it stood it was the most elegant and original internal public space in the City. And it was in an absolutely modern style, not at all historicist like the porch. In other words the Corporation had no need to take the hindoo style to heart; it was all about external projection, about external image and perception. It was an advertisement for the outward-looking attitude of the city’s governing body.

However despite this architectural flourish the Corporation was as much, if not more, about the protection of its ancient rights and privileges, about reinforcing the closed shop that was the city’s government. As a result it became increasingly obsessed with its medieval origins and the next changes to the Guildhall reflected this intense interest.

In the 1860s, the city architect the great Sir Horace Jones started the process of undoing the eighteenth century alterations to the medieval Guildhall hall and re-gothicising it. He was also commissioned to build an extension to the building for a Museum and Library which are really impressive and were completed in 1872. You can see these today. But what you cannot see because it was lost in 1940 was his most important addition to the complex which was his astonishing Council Chamber a sort of gothic chapter-house. A twelve sided council chamber with a soaring iron framed dome.

The war damaged the Guildhall badly and the architect chosen to rebuild it afterwards was Sir Giles Gilbert Scott, the architect of Liverpool Anglican cathedral, and Bankside Power Station – now Tate Modern. He repaired the medieval Guildhall with great care but had little respect for much else on the site – this was swept away and a whole new wing of administrative offices took their place. This, of course, in many ways was absolutely essential. The Corporation, like all other local authorities after the war was taking on a much wider range of responsibilities and these required managing by professional officers. The new building was to the north of the Guildhall and I am rather a fan of it. Many of you will see Tate Modern in the carefully designed brickwork. This was an elegant fusion of classical and Georgian styles built without frills, as frills were not to be had in 1955-8 – building materials were in short supply.

Sir Giles died in 1960 and his son Richard Gilbert Scott took things on. After the war, Guildhall Yard was no wider than the hall porch. The Yard was bounded on its west by the Courts building and on the other by the remains of the bombed out Victorian Art Gallery. The Yard was so narrow that a London taxi could not turn in it and had to reverse out. This caused complete chaos on ceremonial occasions. So the plan was to demolish the conglomeration of Victorian and Edwardian buildings in front of the guildhall to make a fashionable precinct. The sort of large paved area found in so many post war shopping centres.

So the works of 1969-75, included the demolition of Church Passage, of George Dance’s office range and the memorial drinking fountain of St Lawrence Jewry. This enabled an enlarged Guildhall Yard to be created and the design included an ambulatory to link different styles and dates and to the new Guildhall library and offices. I think this was done brilliantly. The hardest thing to do in architecture is to harmoniously link old and new. And here the task was to link very old and very new! The range with its stripped away fan vaults in thin concrete crankle roof linked with a large new wing of office to contain the library.

The final stage in the hugely long, expensive and ambitious post-war reconstruction of the Guildhall began in in 1997 under Richard Gilbert Scott

with D.Y. Davies Associates. The new building was to be where the bomb damaged Guildhall Art Gallery, Courts of Law and chapel once stood. This building now acts as the City’s art gallery.

What is interesting about all this work is that the post war changes to the Guildhall site had the effect of opening it up again. During the nineteenth century it had become more enclosed, boxed in by not very good Victorian buildings. What the Corporation did in the 1970s was open up this great precinct. Now why did this happen? Was it because the building was gradually becoming democratised? As the Corporation modernised itself did it want to open up its face to the public. Just as Dance’s porch had been an advertisement to the city traders of the global reach of the City was the new Forecourt a sign of a newly democratic institution embracing the modern world?

Maybe. Or was it to solve a more prosaic and mundane problem? Actually the driving force was that the Corporation wanted to build a forecourt that would allow hundreds of people to arrive by taxi at great banquets, the Queen to arrive in her Rolls Royce and the Lord Mayor’s Coach to do a turn. This was a traffic scheme, the dominating theme in town planning of its age. It was about the motor car and about the smooth organisation of civic ceremonial.

But I think this had changed quite a lot by 1997. I was the Director of the Museum of London in those days and the Corporation was acutely aware that it needed to modernise and to share the great riches it had in terms of art, architecture and culture more widely. While the Guildhall Yard had not been a democratising of the Guildhall, the Guildhall gallery unquestionably was. This was a totally first rate building to show the Corporation’s collections to the public. Of course it could double as a venue, but its raison d’etre was public access.

So where does all this leave us tonight? Despite attempts over the ages the Mayor, now of course the Lord Mayor, is still King in his kingdom and the Guildhall is still his official palace. The very fact that the Guildhall is still in use shows that the corporation is deeply aware of its ancient roots and ancient privileges. And unquestionably this building is representative of both. But Guildhall Yard today reflects not the desire of the corporation to ape royal architecture and symbolism, thanks to the reconstruction completed in 2000, it represents the face of a modern democratic institution that is physically and intellectually open to the public. If you have not been to have a look recently, then I hope I have inspired you to do so.

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