

A Guide to the History of the Bartholomew Room



The Eynsham Market House, rather unfairly known as ‘The Bartholomew Room’ was, according to the Trustees of the Bartholomew School, ‘...originally built by public subscription upon land granted by the Lord of the Manor in 1701.’ (Information supplied by the Ministry of Education). The earliest ‘Charity Board’ preserved in the upstairs room is dated 1703 and records the various benefactors and their gifts, among them being John Bartholomew, who presented a mere £3. The misnomer came about in the reading of his will of 1700; Bartholomew, who died in 1724, aged 52, left £350 to educate ten boys, who wore as a distinguishing mark an armband with a brass “B”. He thus was responsible for the education and not for the building, although according to another board he also donated ‘2/6 per week for tenn poor widdowers and widdows for ever’.



Originally the room upstairs was supported on pillars, free standing, as in other market houses, such as Market Harborough (1614), Tetbury (1655), Wallingford (1670), Wootton Bassett (1700), etc., the spaces beneath providing an open-air shelter for the market folk. A late 18th century drawing of the Market Cross in the Oxford Central Library reveals in the background part of the House in its original state, showing pillars slender enough to have been made of wood, as were the former stone-built Assembly Rooms at Barnet, although the closest surviving equivalent at Faringdon has pillars of stone.



When accommodation was needed in 1814 to house the newly-acquired fire engine (its machinery is dated 1843 however), the failing wooden pillars were presumably replaced by seven stout open arches of stone, which appear in the 1826 drawing entitled ‘Market House at Eynsham, Oxfordshire’ by JC Buckler (1793-1894) in the Bodleian Library, and reproduced in the Eynsham Record, No.1, p.20. The two building periods are even now denoted by the quality of the stone courses, the original and upper ones being better laid (in ‘coursed rubble’) and the later added ones below (in ‘random rubble’), the division being a horizontal band of stone. Later, when the market decayed, the arches were filled in, apart from the doorway and the five lunettes; it will be noted that the north-west arch is wider than the others, and this marks the position of the fire-engine house, requiring large wooden doors, visible in old postcards of the High Street. In 1826 the roof sported a decorative finial and weathervane which unfortunately have not survived.

The building has had a variety of uses, such as a vestry room, a school, a lock-up, a fire-engine house, and a practice room for the village band, as well as a Roman Catholic Church, a county

branch library and a woodworking shop. The upper room is now the Parish Council Chamber and has, hanging on its walls, six interesting 'charity boards' listing benefactions and dating from 1703 to 1831. Since 1970, the lower room has been used by the Eynsham Arts Group for exhibitions. In 1983, the building was purchased by the Parish Council from the Trustees and was restored. A tablet carved by Mr Bill Brown was unveiled on the East facade in October 1984 commemorating the purchase of the House from funds raised to mark the Silver Jubilee of H.M. Queen Elizabeth II.



In 1846/7 the Bartholomew School removed to Station Road, to a site donated by Samuel Druce. The fire-engine remained and was still there in 1954, although it had not been used since the 1939 fire at Swinford Farm. Subsequently it was housed for a while in the south aisle of the Parish Church, but in 1960, when more space for seating was required, it was moved into the Vicarage garden, happily to be rescued and restored by the Eynsham fire brigade, who displayed it first in Blenheim in 1970/1 and again at the Eynsham Carnival in 1981.

In 1929 St. Peter's Roman Catholic Church was established in the old Market House by Father John Lopes, and a visual reminder of its sojourn is provided by a photograph of the 1937 Coronation celebrations which shows its notice board hanging by the doorway. In 1943 the Catholic church removed to its present site which, through lack of foresight, has sadly precluded any future complete excavation of the Abbey site. The county branch library was in occupation from 1951 to 1970 when it, in turn, moved to a new building in Back Lane.



The property was recognised for its importance and registered as a Listed Property by Historic England in 1955. A crudely carved shield of unknown arms has been inserted over the doorway. This was rescued from the remains of Coates's barn in Back Lane, demolished in 1963. It has been suggested that its original position was on the Abbey gatehouse, and this is borne out by the resiting of a similar shield in Abbey Street, unfortunately and carelessly set on its side under the guttering of No.6. Two other shields bearing the same charges are to be found on early 16th century corbels, even more crudely carved, supporting the nave roof of Standlake church, one being the mirror image of the other and breaking heraldic rules! The arms have erroneously been attributed to the Abbey; to its founder Aethelmar Earl of Cornwall; and to Bartholomew himself; they are more fully discussed in my leaflet on the visible remains of the Abbey to be had from the church. Incidentally the shield forms the basis of the Bartholomew School 'badge'.

A story is told that while in use as a lock-up in the 1880s, a wretched egg thief met his doom in the building. Having been passed a light for his pipe by kind villagers, he accidentally set fire to his bedding straw and, as the gaoler was away with the key in Witney (or Oxford), the prisoner could not be saved. In more recent times, firewatchers in the last war reported having had ghostly experiences during the night!

Source – William Bainbridge – reproduced from the Eynsham Record No 2 (1986) by kind permission of Eynsham History Group