

Snapshots in Time: Mapping Wells

MARKET HALL AND ASSIZES

History

Simes' Plan of 1735 (figure 1) shows a substantial building, the Market Hall, in the Market Place to the east of the High Cross and Conduit. It was built in 1662/3. This long-lost building was known by several names over the centuries: The Market Hall,

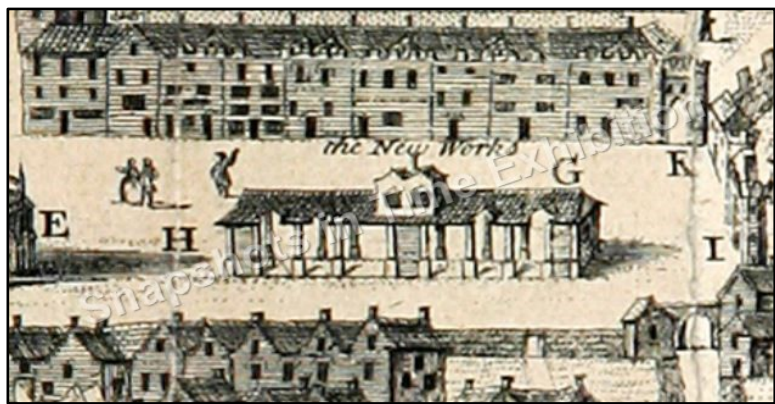


Figure 1 W. Simes, *A Plan of the City of Wells*, 1735. Reproduced with kind permission of Somerset Archaeological and Natural History Society (ref: DD\SAS/C795/PR/504)

Assizes, Town Hall, Exchequer or Market House. These different names give us clues as to how the building was used. This was the second Market Hall on this site.

The first Market Hall was erected c.1548¹ from money provided by Bishop Knight (1541-1547) and from the surplus funds from a legacy left in 1537 by Richard Woolman, Dean of Wells, for the replacement of the old High Cross². It was then re-built 1662/3. The historian Tony Scrase suggests that this was because the Hall had fallen into disrepair. Simes' Plan shows how the re-built Hall might have looked. The Corporation provided most of the money which they raised through the trade companies.

The Market Hall was demolished c.1780: judges and magistrates had been increasingly critical of the conditions of the ground floor of the Market House, which housed the Assizes. Scrase notes "in 1752 and 1756 the Corporation had discussed making the

¹ Tony Scrase, *Wells A Small City* (Stroud, Tempus Publishing Ltd, 2006), p 119

² *Ibid* p 70

courts 'warmer and more comfortable'. The loss of the assizes (to the town) would be a serious blow to both trade and prestige. By 1776 the threat was so real that the Corporation nerved themselves to act. They resolved to rebuild the Hall at a cost of £2000. They offered to contribute 1000 guineas (£1050) if the county subscribed the rest."³ However, the Hall was not rebuilt. The canonical house (the old archdeacon's house) on the south side of the market place was offered by the bishop and archdeacon of Wells and this offer was taken up by the Corporation. The canonical house was demolished and a new Town Hall built in its place with the former garden of the canonical house being turned into an extension of the market place. There was no further need for the old Market Hall and this was demolished.

What did the Market Hall look like?

The only known two-dimensional illustration is within Simes' Plan which has been reproduced in figure 2.

This shows a long, pillared building with steps leading up to rooms on the first floor. The ground floor was open to the elements apart from when screens were placed between the pillars for certain

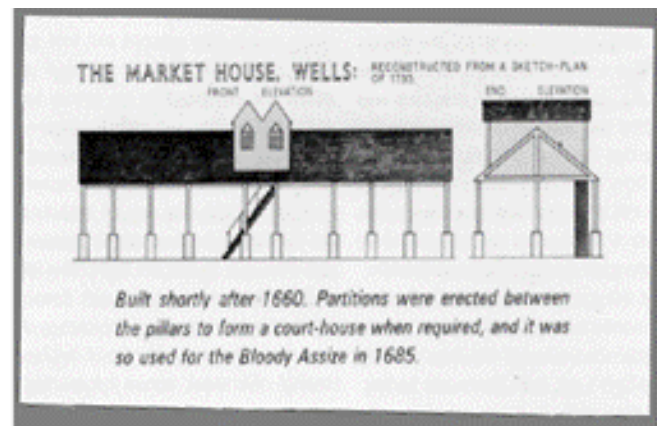


Figure 2 Reproduced with kind permission of South West Heritage Trust.

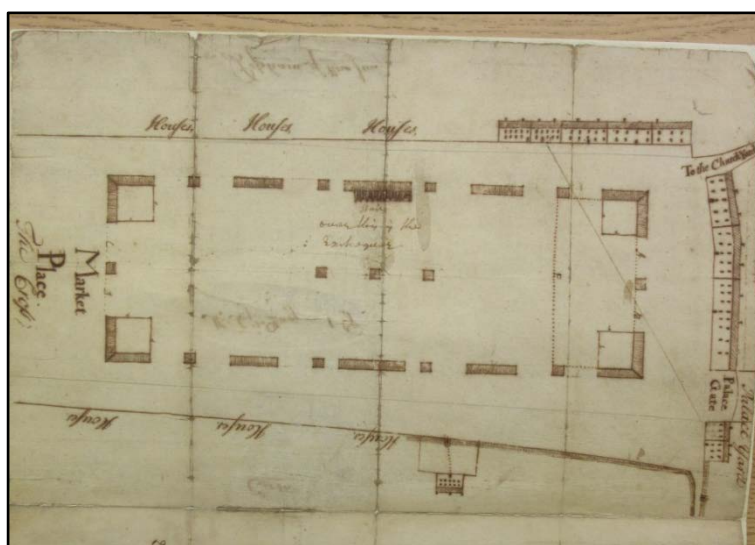


Figure 3 Case involving the Market House, also used for an Assize and Sessions Hall, in Wells, 1767. Reproduced with kind permission of South West Heritage Trust (ref: DD\WM/1/3)

³ Ibid, p118-119

activities held in the building.

In addition, a plan exists which was drawn in 1767 (figure 3). This related to a legal case. Note the size of the Market Hall in comparison with buildings to the right and top of the plan. These were clearly not drawn to scale! The old archdeacon's house, the site of

the new town hall, is shown on the south side, with boundary wall and gateway leading into the garden.

What was the Market Hall used for?

The Market Hall was the site of market stalls: corn, cheese and bacon⁴. According to Thomas Serel, *“The tolls arising from the markets held under the Exchequer, were given by Bishop Knight, to the choristers, for ever.”*⁵

The ground floor of the building was also used for the Assizes which were transferred permanently from Chard in 1667. The Sessions, presided over by Justices of the Peace, were also located here. The ground floor was enclosed by screens between the columns on either side and at both ends to protect it from the weather and to separate it from the market when in use as the Assizes.⁶ Part was also enclosed for the Sessions. In 1767, these screens were the subject of a dispute as the Corporation had decided that a number would stay in place preventing the free flow of people from all sides of the building and forcing several market traders to erect their stalls outside of the Market Hall.⁷

Evidence also tells us that the Corporation met upstairs from the 1660s. Its name as the ‘Exchequer’ suggests that money was collected here, possibly by the bailiff of the market or the Corporation, as proposed by Tony Scrase.

The building has a gruesome history: it was used for the Assize court presided over by the notorious Judge Jeffreys in the trial of the supporters of the Monmouth Rebellion.

The Monmouth Rebellion

Background

James II had succeeded to the crown in 1685 on the death of his brother Charles II, who had no legitimate children. James II was a Catholic. In the years preceding his succession to the throne there had been growing wide-spread anti-Catholic feeling across the country, fuelled by a fear that Catholics were plotting to overthrow the established

⁴ Case involving the Market House, also used as an Assize and Sessions Hall, in Wells, 1767, South West Heritage Trust, (DD\WM/1/3)

⁵ Thomas Serel, *A lecture on the History of Wells*, (Wells, 1858) p 40

⁶ Scrase, *Wells A Small City*, p 99

⁷ Case involving the Market House, also used as an Assize and Sessions Hall, in Wells, 1767)

Protestant Church and the State. The prospect of a Catholic monarch, the first since Mary Tudor over a century earlier, only served to heighten fears.

The Duke of Monmouth was the result of Charles II's 'dalliance' with his mistress, Lucy Walter. Born in Rotterdam in 1649 when the king was in exile, he came to England with his father at the Restoration of the Monarchy. He was made Duke of Monmouth in 1662, married the Lady Anne Scott, daughter and heiress to the Earl of Buccleuch and served his country in the navy and later in the army in Continental wars. He was a Protestant.

The Rebellion

Monmouth was persuaded to lead a rebellion against the Catholic James II by raising an army to overthrow him. It was felt that there would be populist support for him to become king; a tour of the west country in 1680 had persuaded him that he would be supported as the next Protestant king to succeed his father, Charles II

Monmouth's strategy was to land in the West of England, build his army, take control of that part of the country and then march on London. He landed at Lyme Regis on 11th June 1685 with 3 small ships and 85 men.⁸ He published a "Declaration for the defence and vindication of the Protestant religion and of the laws, rights and privileges of England from the invasion made upon them, and for delivering the Kingdom from the usurpation and tyranny of us by the name of James, Duke of York"

Monmouth gradually amassed an army mostly comprised of farm labourers, non-conformists⁹ and artisans, as he marched to various parts of the West Country engaging in skirmishes against the County Militia.

The route taken by Monmouth included visiting Wells on 23rd June and then a week or so later. It is believed that Monmouth received little support in Wells on the first visit due to the "*strong presence of the established Church in Wells*"¹⁰ On the second visit, the whole army came to Wells in search of supplies as news had reached them that waggons belonging to the king's army and containing money, arms and ammunition were in the city. The rebels seized the waggons but also went on to attack the Cathedral, take lead from the roof to make into bullets, damage much of the furnishings and the organ, and

⁸ www1.somerset.gov.uk/archives/ASH_Monmouthreb.htm, accessed 3/1/2017

⁹ In English church history, a nonconformist was a Protestant Christian who did not "conform" to the governance and usages of the established Church of England

¹⁰ Anna Baines, *The Monmouth Rebellion*, (Frome: Hunting Raven Press), p1

stable their horses in the Nave. A report written in the Chapter Acts following a meeting of the Cathedral Chapter later that day states:

*“The Civil War still grows, this Cathedral Church has suffered very grievously from the rebel fanatics who have this very morning laid hands upon the furniture thereof, have almost utterly destroyed the organ, and turned the sacred building into a stable for horses. The Chapter meeting is therefore adjourned to July 29th before which time it is hoped that the nefarious rebellion will be utterly put down.”*¹¹

It is possibly not surprising that the rebels turned on the Cathedral as not long beforehand the Cathedral Chapter had loaned £100 to the Duke of Somerset, Lord Lieutenant, in support of the Militia fighting the rebels.¹²

Despite raising support across the county, Monmouth’s army was ill-trained and poorly armed. It was unable to match the professionalism of James II’s army when this reached the West Country and which comprised regular soldiers, cavalry and artillery. Against this more professional and better armed force, the Rebellion was defeated at the Battle of Sedgemoor on 6th July. Monmouth fled, hoping to escape abroad but was captured and beheaded on Tower Hill on 15th July.

The Bloody Assizes

The Bloody Assizes were established to bring to trial all those who had supported Monmouth. They were so-called because of the large numbers of people who were convicted of treason and hung, drawn and quartered. The engraving shown in figure 4 depicts just how horrific and barbaric was this practice.

The Assizes were held at Winchester, Dorchester, Exeter, Taunton, Bristol and Wells, presided over by the Lord Chief Justice, Judge Jeffreys, and five other judges. Judge Jeffreys promised to “to breathe death

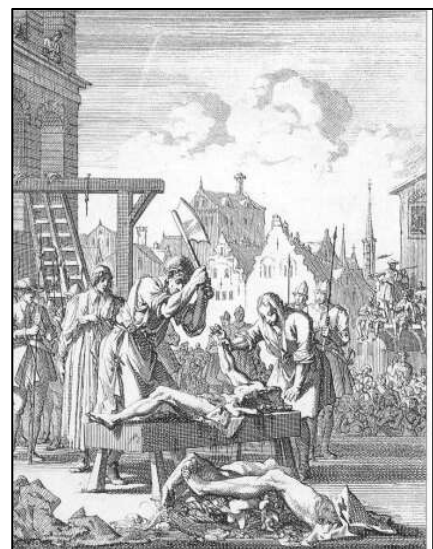


Figure 4 Engraving depicting the execution of Sir Thomas Armstrong in 1683 and his body being quartered.

¹¹Report on the Manuscripts of Wells Cathedral, (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1885), p264

¹² Ibid

like a destroying angel and to sanguine his very ermins in blood".¹³

An estimated 1300 prisoners were tried before the courts. They were 'encouraged' to plead guilty, as early in the trials it had been shown that a plea of 'not guilty' led to immediate death by hanging. Of these 1300, some 300 were hung, drawn and quartered and their body parts pickled in tar and displayed for a year around the towns and roads as a deterrent to future uprisings. A number negotiated more 'lenient' judgements and were obliged to pay ruinous fines and the rest (around 800)¹⁴ found themselves transported into slavery unless they were lucky enough to die in captivity. Transportation became a 'popular' sentence as the Crown earned £12 from each man sold into slavery, a significant sum of money at the time.

The Assizes started on 23rd September in Wells. On the first day, over 500 prisoners were tried and sentence passed. Judge Jeffreys' Warrant of 26th September and The Judges List sent to the Treasury on 12th November 1685 showed the following for Wells¹⁵:

○ To be executed:	99
○ To be transported:	383
○ To be reprieved or pardoned:	20
○ To be kept in custody as witnesses for the King:	14
○ To be kept in custody for want of evidence:	13
○ To be fined, imprisoned or whipped for seditious words:	6
○ To be bound over for £100:	128

Of those condemned, 8 were hanged, drawn and quartered in Wells and the rest in towns around Somerset – a gruesome sight, made worse by the display of their quarters.

Two Bishops of Bath & Wells were participants in the Monmouth Rebellion. Bishop Mews (then the Bishop of Winchester) drove his coach and horses to Sedgemoor to help in the battle on the side of James II and later preached at a Service of Thanksgiving in the cathedral.

¹³ Donald E. Wilkes, Jr. Collection: *The Bloody Assizes* (University of Georgia School of Law, 2016) (<http://libguides.law.uga.edu/c.php?g=177206&p=1164802>, accessed 4 January 2017)

¹⁴ Exact numbers of those tried, hanged or transported vary from source to source. Records made at the time are incomplete.

¹⁵ Baines, p15-24

Bishop Ken, shocked by the conditions the prisoners were held in, firstly appealed to the King for mercy and when unsuccessful, turned his attention to the prisoners' welfare. He was also one of four men chosen to prepare Monmouth for his execution (figure 5) and stood by him on the scaffold.

As an important footnote to this episode in English history, James II was forced into permanent exile in 1690 after the Battle of Boyne where he was defeated by the staunch Protestant, William of Orange; James had already been judged as having abdicated the throne when he fled to Europe in 1688, finding that he had lost the support of his navy and army in the face of the invasion by William of Orange. Concern had been mounting at the prospect of the continued succession of Catholic kings in England

following the birth of a healthy son and heir to James in 1688; this led to the appeal by several Protestant Lords and clergy to William of Orange, who was married to James II's eldest daughter, Mary, to invade England and ensure the continuation of the Church of England. In early 1689 William and Mary were crowned King and Queen of England.

And what of the notorious Judge Jeffreys? Attempting to flee the country following James II's flight to Europe in 1688, Judge Jeffreys was captured and locked up in the Tower of London where he died in 1689 of an illness which had plagued him for several years and which some believe was a factor in the way he conducted the assizes: the acute pain he was suffering would have led him to mete out more extreme punishment than was normal.



Figure 5 The execution of the Duke of Monmouth. Artist unknown. Source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Scott,_1st_Duke_of_Monmouth, accessed 19/4.17

If you would like further information on the history of Wells and its buildings, you are welcome to contact or visit Wells City Archives (archives@wellsmuseum.org.uk) and Wells & Mendip Museum (admin@wellsmuseum.org.uk).