

BISHOP'S CASTLE TOWN HALL RENOVATION PARTNERSHIP

FACT: Bishop's Castle Town Hall is Grade II* listed. This puts it in the top 8% of listed buildings *nationally*. English Heritage describe Grade II* buildings as 'particularly important buildings of more than special interest'.

So the building represents simultaneously, both a major responsibility and a major historical and architectural asset. Concerned about the falling use and deteriorating condition of the Town Hall, the Town Council set up the Town Hall Renovation Partnership some years ago, inviting onto it groups such as the Parochial Church Council, the Civic Society, South West Shropshire Historical and Archaeological Society and the House On Crutches Museum Trust.

After two failed bids to the Heritage Lottery Fund, in 2009 they sought views from local people on what could and should be done. Background research was also carried out to check whether specific proposals were practical.

Ideas for new uses were many and varied, with some repeated themes .The ideas for the building ranged from 'Fit an external glass elevator', to 'Do nothing, it's fine as it is'.

Unprotected edge of string course where water can collect on top surface in severe weather and cause saturation of the wall

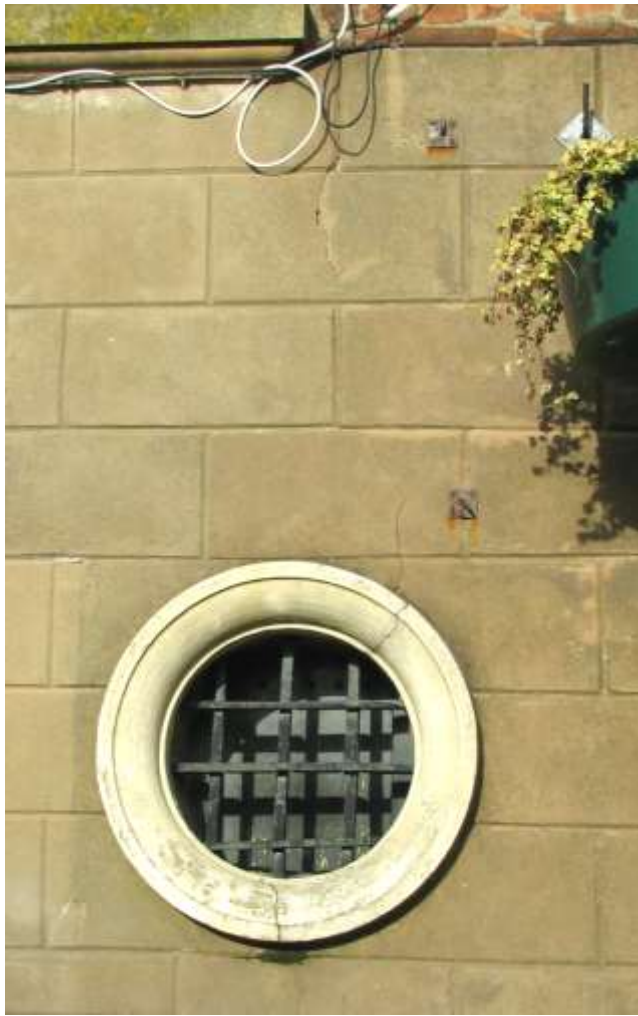


Lead work sits on stone. There should be T section and an anti-capillary device on the edge of the lead to prevent water getting beneath the lead.

In periods of persistent rainfall, cement mortar can prevent water evaporating at the surface of the joint, resulting in saturation of the wall

Note saturation of South facing wall





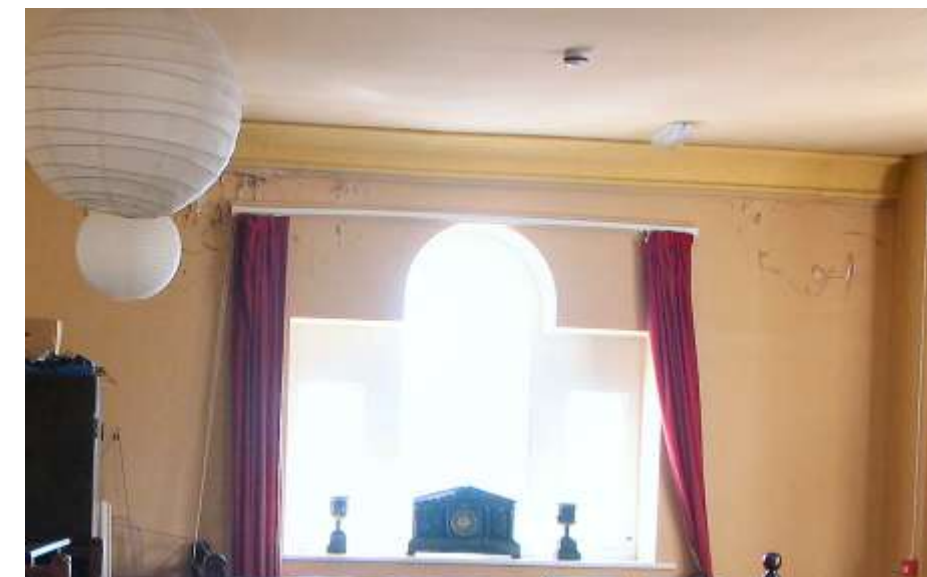
The essential repairs, illustrated above, are currently in hand. However, expert advice strongly suggests that additional extensive conservation and restoration is required to secure the long-term future of the building.

Cracked and failing cement render and mortar traps water and further damages the original fabric of the building and causes it to be damp and feel cold.



Other problems identified that threaten the building's long-term viability are

- difficult access (impossible for wheelchair users)
- inadequate insulation and heating
- 'poor' appearance according to some respondents



Below are the ideas from the initial survey which work together to complement the historic building and meet identified local needs. The proposal to implement them in one major project received overwhelming support in the public consultation conducted throughout February 2010 in Bishop's Castle.

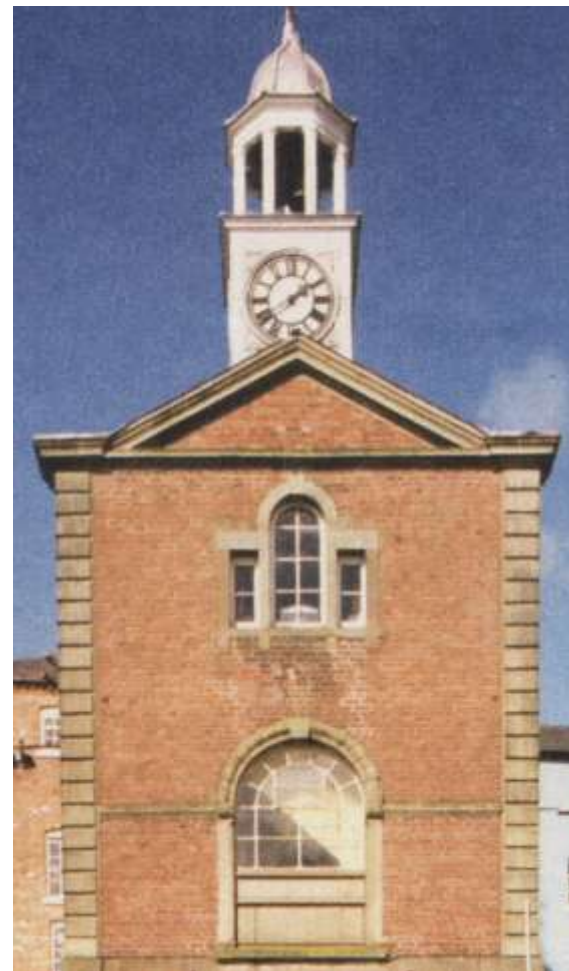
IDEAS FOR IMPROVEMENTS

- Essential repairs and conservation work
- Provide access for the disabled throughout, via ground level entrance to basement on east side and an internal lift.
- Insulate and put in energy efficient heating and lighting
- Modernise & provide internal access to the toilets via lift.
- Remove later additions: staircase & kitchen in Market Hall
- Remove infill to market hall arches, re-glazing to floor
- Enhance the setting with extended paving to south & east
- Additional access to basement toilets: a glazed-in stairway from Market Hall, on west side.

Wherever 'Market Hall' appears, it refers to the room in the Town Hall in which markets are held.



Below the Market Hall and adjacent to the existing toilets, is an old cistern, part of the pre-existing guildhall. Access to this could enlarge the basement allowing for disabled entrance lobby, heritage displays, lift, modernised toilets and storage.



The staircase and panelled kitchen in the Market Hall are late, unsympathetic additions to the building



Far left: windows as existing
Left: windows as proposed
Right: Glazed staircase from Market Hall, via window arch, to give an additional route to the basement



These are computer generated images (to give an impression only) of the overall effect of two of the ideas above.

IDEAS FOR NEW USES

Note: most respondents wished to see the existing uses continue, if possible, with the addition of some or all of the new ones. Most of the new uses depend on carrying out the improvements above.

- Tourism Information office
- Showcase or retail units for local businesses
- Heritage displays and events
- Art, craft & other exhibitions and workshops
- Youth Council
- Youth re-enactment group, using building's history
- New uses linked to town festivals
- Wedding ceremonies in the Council Chamber

FACT: Officers representing Shropshire Council and English Heritage are receptive to ideas for restoring and modifying the Town Hall for new uses. Buildings are most likely to be conserved if they are used and generate some income for upkeep.

FACT: These ideas were sent to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF), in order to check whether they could form part of a project the HLF *might* fund. They have invited a '1st Round Application'. This would lead on to all ideas being subject to rigorous feasibility studies.

DELIVERING THE PROJECT: CAPITAL WORKS

The capital works will be delivered, within a fixed timescale by specialist contractors selected by the tendering process in compliance with the requirements of grant providers. A key element of this is the provision of *full* access for the elderly and disabled, essential for securing new and continued uses.

DISABLED ACCESS

FACT: The Town Council has complied with the Disability Discrimination Act, as far as is practicable, within its budget and taking account of the historic character of the Town Hall, but it remains inaccessible to wheelchair users.

Some respondents as well as some councillors regard the lack of disabled access to the Town Hall as a serious deficit in the operation of local democracy, which may cause the Council to consider moving, if no remedy is in hand.

Advice was sought from the Access Officer of South Shropshire District Council early in 2009. The proposals for the changes to the building including the siting of the disabled entrance and lift are based on his advice - to the basement on the east elevation, where the men's public toilets are at present. He recommended involving the Highways section of the (then) Shropshire County Council so that modifications to the carriageway and pavements to improve the approach could be considered.

Ahead of this, some local residents with mobility problems were invited to form an advisory panel. They have been informed of and contributed to the proposals for disabled access to the building, and one was able to meet with officers from Shropshire Council Highways department at the Town Hall.

At this early stage, the visit from Highways staff simply resulted in a review of options with no firm proposals, but with a recommendation for an in-depth analysis and public consultation.

It is possible that some low cost modifications to the immediate environment, to assist disabled access, such as dropped kerbs, may be undertaken by Shropshire Council, within their annual budget.

It is open to the Town Council, County Councillors and the general public to argue for a more substantial contribution from Shropshire Council to improving the immediate environment of the Town Hall.

DELIVERING THE PROJECT: ACTIVITIES

The new activities proposed are to continue into the future well beyond the timescale of the capital project and following the outcome of the public consultation which demonstrated a high level of support for them, the Town Council agreed in principle to build partnerships with local organisations to help deliver them.

1. PARTNERSHIP WITH BISHOP'S CASTLE TOURISM COMMUNITY INTEREST COMPANY (BCTCIC)

This organisation succeeded the BC Tourism Group, which has been active in the town for many years. It has over 100 members, mostly business owners from the hospitality, retail, service and craft sectors of the local economy. It works closely with the local Business Network based at Enterprise House, which is the successor organisation to the local Chamber of Trade, which folded through lack of support 3 years ago.

BCTCIC members recognise the important links between heritage, tourism and the town's economic well-being. They value the opportunity this project offers to combine these elements within the Town Hall, making the most of this beautiful historic building, while showcasing what the town has to offer today.

A recent survey revealed a demand for a staffed Tourism office in Bishop's Castle identifying the Town Hall as a favoured venue. Visitors also wanted better access to the history of Bishop's Castle. An attractive, light, warm, flexible space in the Market Hall will house the Tourism Office and a range of other income generating activities.

FACT: The HLF require good public access to any project they fund. A proposal that includes daily access for the general public to the Town Hall, with of a variety of opportunities for a wide range of people to learn about its heritage, will be much more likely to succeed.

BCTCIC, a not-for-profit organisation, is willing to staff and manage the Tourism Office in the Town Hall, opening the building daily for general public access and for specific activities, subject to an agreement with the Town Council which allocates income from new activities to defray the staff costs. It will also expand access to the heritage buildings and collections cared for by volunteer groups in the town, by promoting group visits to their venues and hosting events.

Parking, long a vexed issue around the Town Hall, is less likely to be exacerbated by the uses outlined above as they predominantly involve the spending of leisure time, to which, a short walk from home, B&B, or the car park is no bar.

2. PARTNERSHIP WITH BISHOP'S CASTLE HERITAGE RESOURCE CENTRE (BCHRC)

BCHRC belongs to the House on Crutches Museum Collection Trust, a charity and a Company Limited by Guarantee. Its purpose is to educate the public in the history of Bishop's Castle and district, through displaying the museum collection, but also by providing information. In establishing the Heritage Resource Centre, with HLF funding, the Trust has extended its activities into research, the creation of a local archive and outreach. It has already produced preliminary research into the Town Hall.

FACT: Built during the 1760s, the Town Hall is the last remaining civic building in Bishop's Castle which provides a link to over 400 years of self-government begun here under Elizabeth I.

Volunteers at BCHRC are now working to establish it as a Local History Centre during 2010. This is in response to demand from individuals, both locals and visitors with roots here as well as organisations, who wish to research family and house history or other specific projects. Amongst those have been:

- The history of the Bowling Club
- The story of the African's Grave
- Our Farming Roots
- A celebration of the Agricultural Show.
- Collecting Carnival memories



BCHRC is ready to assist the Town Council in researching and sharing the Town Hall's history, for example by hosting Heritage Discovery Days for the Community College in the Town Hall. BCHRC and other groups will make regular use of the space afforded by the Town Hall - a facility lacking at other heritage venues.

FACT: The existing volunteer-run heritage venues in town have restricted opening times and some, especially the museums, are short of space for public events. See section on BCTCIC above.

DELIVERING THE PROJECT: OTHER ACTIVITIES: ARTS, DRAMA AND YOUTH

Castle Artists and the Real Furniture Group are amongst those keenly interested in the potential of the Town Hall for exhibitions and workshops. Officers of Shropshire Council have also identified a district wide demand for good exhibition space. While there are venues in town that have been and are being used for this purpose, local artists feel that none are quite ideal. They want good natural light, in an attractive setting, with access for all.

Under Option 2, the aim for the Market Hall would be to create a flexible, multi-functional space, with, at one end, an open plan Tourism office and display space, which can be screened off from the main hall as required, for example for wedding gatherings.

This CGI is included to give an impression of the light interior of the renovated market hall. The finishes are randomly chosen. The Tourism office would be further back, in line with 2nd beam



Local residents with theatrical experience are interested in creating a youth drama group based at the renovated Town Hall. This is of interest to staff at SpArC, where a major new project is underway to involve young people in the area in developing art and drama initiatives of their own.

The arts and youth staff at SpArC can see exciting opportunities for joint ventures with a youth drama group that uses the history and setting of the Town Hall for inspiration and performance. Such a partnership could co-produce dramas that, like the old mummers plays, move round the town, while telling their story.

They see the possible Tourism Information office in the Town Hall as a potential booking office for their own events too, helping to promote SpArC to locals and tourists alike

Several Councillors wish to foster the establishment of a Youth Council, to mirror the Town Council to provide an insight into the functioning of local democracy. This does not depend on renovation, but would have a greater chance of success if the building was accessible to all, as well as being warm and welcoming.

LONG TERM EFFECTS: WILL CURRENT USES CONTINUE ?

The outcome of the public consultation made it very clear that the town wants to see *all* the current uses of the Town Hall continue alongside the desired new uses. This requirement will be a main priority for the project team in the development phase. One of the aims of the project from the beginning has been to improve the building to ensure that its current uses can continue.

WILL OTHER VENUES IN THE TOWN BE AFFECTED?

Community facilities

Managers of the other public venues in town have all been consulted and a table of facilities and uses drawn up for ease of comparison.

Each venue has its own qualities which suit it for particular uses. For instance the large Public Hall with ample nearby parking, and ease of loading and unloading is used for auctions. With its bar and large, well equipped kitchen, it is used for receptions, dances and discos.

The cosier Methodist Hall hosts different activities: coffee mornings; children's groups; yoga and slimmers groups.

The Church Barn has a similar spread of community uses, as well as those relating directly to the Church.

Inserting the renovated Town Hall into this table produces few overlaps, so that securing its future, should be achieved without affecting other town amenities. Where there is an overlap, as with weddings for instance, the Town Hall is offering something different, an alternative for those who want a secular service, in a historic venue.

Businesses

Commercial venues, especially the hospitality sector will benefit. If the Town Hall becomes a wedding venue, a variety of related local businesses will be boosted.

A Tourism office in the Town Hall would act as a 'reception point' for visitors to the town enhancing their experience, so that they stay longer and return. This wouldn't just benefit 'tourist businesses', many 'standard' retailers say that visitors contribute significantly to sales, helping to ensure these shops are still here for local customers.

Some retailers of art/craft/antiques/books may fear competition for sales from the Tourism office. Others take the view that the more there is of interest in the town the more people will come whose interests are nourished here.



Lifting the Town Hall out of its present state, and unlocking the wealth of history that it holds could benefit the whole town.

We hope you agree and will support this project in any way you can.