

Local History Group visit to Maldon's Moot Hall on 2nd April 2019

On a rather cold April afternoon 25 of us gathered in the Committee Room on the ground floor of the Moot Hall where we were welcomed by our guide. He explained that this brick-built three-story building on Maldon's High Street was once known as the D'Arcy Tower and is all that remains of a much larger, 15th century, timber manor house owned by Sir Robert D'Arcy.

Robert D'Arcy was born in Maldon c1391 and could trace his lineage back to Norman times. D'Arcy served Maldon as its Member of Parliament for 8 terms between 1416 & 1445. He was a lawyer by trade who became a rich and powerful man as legal adviser to the King and local gentry.

In 1414 D'Arcy became the King's 'Escheator' for Essex, managing estates where there was no male heir to inherit the property. Basically, he dealt in wealthy widows and orphans and probably explains how he came to marry a wealthy widow in 1417. Her name was Alice Fitzlongley, the daughter of a wealthy merchant and a rich heiress with an income twice the size of D'Arcy's own.

The Tower is believed to have been built as an extension to the manor house, around 1420. It was built to the highest standards by Flemish bricklayers and the bricks are laid in 'English Bond'. We were invited to view the brick-built anti-clockwise spiral staircase that leads to the top of the hexagonal stair turret (150ft) commissioned by D'Arcy's son Robert when he inherited the estate in 1440. It is believed to be the oldest surviving brick-built staircase in the country.

When Robert's great grandson Roger D'Arcy died in 1508 the D'Arcy family ceased to occupy the mansion in Maldon. Roger's son Thomas was only 2 when his father died, and he became a ward of court. He became increasingly rich and by 1539, he sold off his mansion in Maldon in order to fund other interests. The brick tower being the only exception. In 1550 he purchased the dissolved priory of St Osyth and surrendered the brick tower to King Henry VIII in part payment. The neglected tower and surrounding land were purchased by the Borough of Maldon Corporation in 1576 for the princely sum of £55 and from that point forward it became known as the Moot Hall.

We were informed that from 1576 the large room in which we were gathered served as the town goal. Then from 1834 it became the Borough Police Station until 1912. Our guide led us through a narrow corridor to the exterior prison yard where prisoners had carved their names in the brickwork, including one George Amey who was a Boatman and a House Breaker! On our way through to the exercise yard our guide

pointed out a vault (partly below ground), believed at one time to have served as a dungeon.

We then proceeded to the first floor which is now preserved as the 18th well court, used by the town's magistrates until the middle of the 20th century. It has the magistrate's bench, the witness stand, the accused's dock and the well, with seating around a large table for the lawyers. Seating for the jury overlooks the well. We were told about the trial of William Seymour for the murder of William Belsham a dairy man, whose pocket watch he wished to steal. During the trial Seymour sat in the 'Constable's Chair' which remains in the courtroom to this day. Seymour was executed at Chelmsford prison, but his skull survives, and a replica adorns the table of the ground floor Committee room.

Another trial concerned a young Maldon lad, named Berry Bradbrook, who was sentenced to 14 years hard labour and transportation to Australia for stealing a silk handkerchief. He appealed against his sentence and the term was reduced to 7 years. He was one of 160 convicts transported on the Minerva to Van Diemen's Land 25th May 1838. Having served his sentence, he settled in South Australia and did very well for himself.

Before we left this floor, our guide led us through a doorway onto the canopy above the front porch. Here we were able to admire the town clock, gifted to Maldon in 1881 by George Courtauld MP. The clock was originally green and gold but was painted black when Queen Victoria died. It is hoped that permission (and funds!) may be given for the clock to be restored to its original glory one day soon.

The second floor of the Moot Hall houses the Council Chamber. This is an elegant Regency room with large windows making it light and airy. The walls are panelled in warm pine wood and are hung with various portraits including one of Queen Anne and one of Thomas Plume (who established the first library in Maldon in 1704. The staffs of the various Mayors of Maldon can also be found in this room. The adjoining Muniment Room contains a chest of French Oak dating from 1420 for the royal charters to be stored in.

From this floor another steep winding staircase leads to the roof which affords panoramic views of the town, the river and surrounding countryside. A fact that can be testified by only a few brave souls in our party!

A most interesting and enlightening afternoon was had by all that attended.

