

# BRIDPORT TOWN HALL ~ *A short history*

The origins of Bridport Town Hall are linked to three buildings that preceded it.

## St Andrews Chapel

Around 1260, St Andrews chapel was erected on the site of the present Town Hall. The chapel was part of a small complex of buildings built around a courtyard. Consecrated as a Chapel of Ease for St Marys Church in 1362, records show that the chapel was still used well into the 17th century. By the 18th century, it had become the property of the Borough authorities and part of the building was in ruins. The remaining parts included a dwelling, a court house, a free school and a gaol or Boccardo, one explanation for the origins of the name Bucky Doo, as the square to the south of the Town Hall has come to be known.

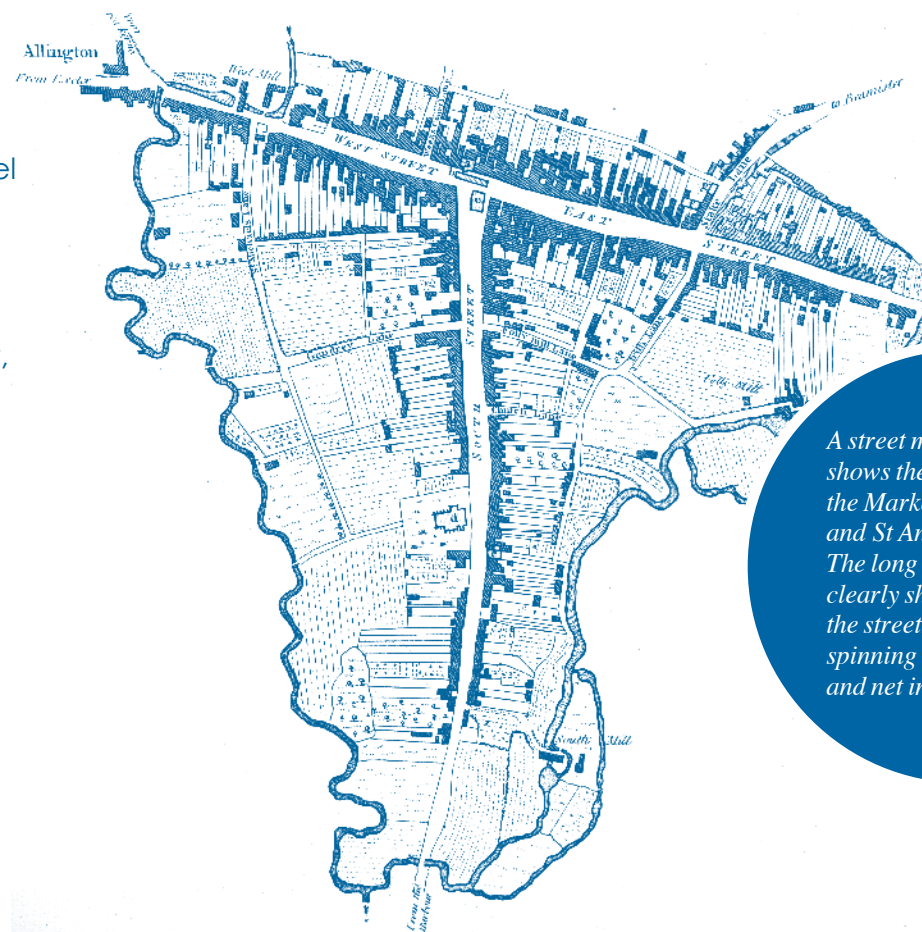
## The Guildhall

In the 14th century, records show a Guildhall on the northern side of the junction at East Street and West Street, approximately where Boots the Chemist is today. It was at one time used as a council chamber and local court.

## The Market House

Built in 1593, the "markett house and scole house" stood in the middle of the junction of East, West and South Streets and was designed to house butcher shops and the first purpose built school room in Bridport. Its butchery function led to it being known locally as "The Shambles," as butchers used to slaughter animals as well as butcher meat. It was probably this that prompted an early move for the boys of the Grammar School to the more salubrious surroundings of old St Andrews Chapel, now the site of the present Town Hall.

Early maps illustrate 10 covered shambles or meat market stalls. Records show that shambles also operated along the eastern edge of St Andrews chapel, in what is now known as Bucky Doo alleyway. In 1534, local butcher John Balston was granted a lease for life of a shamble.



A street map of 1774 shows the Guildhall (a), the Market House (b) and St Andrews Chapel (c). The long thin burgage plots clearly shown running along the streets were used as spinning walks for the rope and net industry.

## Removal of 'Nuisances and Annoyances'

The area around the original Market House was muddy and fouled, especially in wet weather. In 1782, a fire gutted the original Market House building. The Guildhall was also badly damaged by fire in the same year and had to be demolished.

In 1785, the Bridport Improvement Act was passed by parliament. This allowed "for taking down the market house... rebuilding the same, together with a session or court house in a more convenient situation".

Due to the large number of fires, the act also prohibited any new buildings from being roofed with thatch, as well as developing better cleaning, lighting and paving. The 'shambles', or Butchers' Row was demolished and the present Town Hall was built in 1786, at a cost of £2,000.

This manuscript map of 1770 shows the chapel courtyard. The tower of the chapel is shown along the north edge if you rotate the map 90° clockwise.





# THE NEW TOWN HALL

The architect of the new building was William Tyler RA, who was one of the original 40 members of the Royal Academy. It was built from local bricks and Portland stone. The timber was imported from Riga through Bridport Harbour.

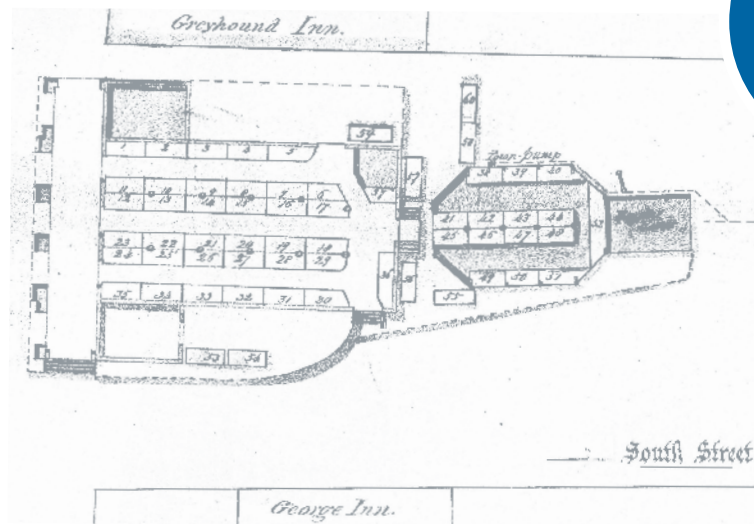
Butcher shops and market stalls remained a feature of the new building. A second market building stood south of the Town Hall, housing corn and general trade stalls. This building later housed the town's fire engine. It was demolished in 1946, to make way for a taxi rank.

The upper storey of the new building incorporated the County and Petty Courts and provided the venue for council meetings, civic and private functions, debates, political gatherings and entertainments.

In 1971, the building ceased to be used as a court house, but within living memory many local people were quite reluctant to enter the Town Hall. The phrase "going up over Town Hall steps" came to mean an appearance before the Magistrates Court.

In the early 1800s, the clock tower was added to the structure, making it a local landmark. A clean water fountain was installed outside the Town Hall in 1877.

From the outset, the trustees of the new Town Hall building resolved, that the Council Chamber should be used for 'all convenient public purposes'.



Decorum dictated what was deemed suitable within such an important and influential building and in 1965 the Dave Welsh All Star Promotions was refused hire of the facilities for All Star wrestling!

The Town Hall has always been at the heart of Bridport. On Bastille Day, 1814, peace with France was proclaimed and 4,000 people processed through Bridport. In 1914, it was the focus for a march past of local volunteers on their way to war.

In 1919, there was a peace parade outside the building of survivors of the Great War and during the Second World War, between 1939 – 1943, crowds gathered to sing patriotic songs. A model thermometer stood against the building, recording the sums raised for the war effort.

The interior of the Town Hall was redecorated in September 1925, under the supervision of Francis H. Newbery.

Records show 37 butcher stalls on the ground floor

The building to the rear of the Town Hall was originally built as a 'corne and greene market' but also accommodated butchers. It also came to house the town's fire engine. The eastern enclosure, fenced and open to the south, contained the poultry market.

## The Town Clock

The original movement was made in 1805 by J. Moore, Clerkenwell, London. In 1919, this was replaced with a movement by J Smith and Sons, Derby. The dials were solid, probably made of wood. They were replaced with glazed skeleton dials, originally gas lit, in 1856.

A 24-hour wheel below the west dial mechanism carried pegs which operated the gas tap; the wheel is preserved, along with one or two other redundant items, inside the clock case.

The bells were recast in 1928 by the Whitechapel Bellfoundry, who had recast the 8 bells of St Mary's Church in 1924. The Town Hall hour bell was made to be exactly one octave higher in pitch than the tenor bell of the church, so that when the two clocks strike the hour together, they are perfectly in tone musically, as well as chronologically.

The clock was hand wound until 1973.

Night silencing was introduced in 1919. It seems always to have been silent between 11pm and 6am; now it is 8am – an interesting reflection of social change.

An old custom, happily still maintained, is to allow the clock to strike thirteen times at midnight on New Year's Eve.

The arches on the ground floor of the building were originally open. Wooden shutters were added in 1792, to protect the market stalls underneath from the weather.



In 1953 Princess Margaret visited the town and spoke outside the Town Hall to commemorate the 700th Anniversary of the Granting of the first Royal Charter to the town.

## A Building for the Future

In 2009, Bridport Town Council applied to the Heritage Lottery Fund and was successful in securing a grant to fund a restoration project. A substantial amount of structural work and repair was required to safeguard the building. The public toilets, installed on the ground floor in the 1930s, were relocated to South Street and the original structure of the building reinstated. A new entrance space opening onto Bucky Doo Square was created, enabling the installation of a public lift.

Today, the Town Hall building still hosts council meetings, community events and is available for public and private hire. For the first time in the Town Hall's history, the whole building is open and accessible for everyone to enjoy.

