

Gloucestershire folk are used to seeing photographs of the frontage of Gloucester Crown Court in the newspapers, accompanying reports of the latest trials. This courtroom has a long history, starting its existence in 1816, as a Court of Assizes and Quarter Sessions.

For hundreds of years (from at least 1558), the Booth Hall in Westgate Street had been used as Gloucester's Shire Hall and as such, it had a variety of functions, including being the place where the courts of Assizes and Quarter Sessions were held. In 1667, the building was extended and enlarged, and two new courtrooms were built, but despite these and later improvements, the courtrooms over time increasingly were seen as inadequate. By the early 1800s, the Assize judges were complaining about the state of the buildings, and the fact that those sitting in one courtroom could hear everything that was happening in the other one. In 1803, the county magistrates resolved to build a new Shire Hall, which would include new courtrooms.

The new Shire Hall, with its impressive columned portico at the front, was designed by Sir Robert Smirke. It was situated next to the old Booth Hall, in Westgate Street. At the back of the building, in Bearland, were two courtrooms, which saw their first business in August 1816, when the Summer Assizes for the county and city were opened.

The *Gloucester Journal* (19 August 1816) remarked, **"Every exception having been made to get the Courts and Offices in our New Shire-Hall ready for the reception of the Judges, the whole business of these Assizes will be carried on in this superb edifice, which does infinite credit to the taste of Mr Smirke, the architect."**

The judges on this occasion were the Honourable Mr Justice Abbot, who tried the criminal cases in one courtroom (the Crown Court), and Mr Baron Richards, who dealt with the civil cases in the other (the Nisi Prius Court). In the Crown Court, Mr Justice Abbot opened proceedings by saying to the members of the Grand Jury, **"I have the highest pleasure in offering my congratulations to you on the completion of the very handsome and convenient Courts wherein we are now assembled."**

He went on to preside over the trials of 56 county prisoners and one from the county gaol. At the end of the Assizes, he had sentenced 16 people to death, but 14 were later reprieved. Dinah Riddiford and John Williams had the dubious distinction of being the first prisoners tried in the new court who were condemned to death and left for execution. They were both hanged on 7 September 1816, at Gloucester Prison.

In a later *Gloucester Journal*, a detailed account of the new buildings was given. It described how at the front of Shire Hall, on either side of the portico, were two doors. The one on the west side led to "the seats of the Judges, Magistrates, Counsel and Attornies, in the Courts". The door on the east side led to the Clerk of the Peace's office and other rooms for the administration of court business. Both the courtrooms were semi-circular, each being 76 feet by 46 feet in dimension, and 30 feet high. Galleries in each could hold up to 400 members of the public. Under the galleries, was an "inclosed Corridor, 11 feet wide, communicating with the different parts of the Courts allotted to Magistrates, Counsel, Grand Juries, Waiting Jury-men, etc". The entrance to the gallery for the Crown Court was through the front entrance of Shire Hall in Westgate Street, and up the grand staircase, while that for the Nisi Prius Court was from Bearland.

Between the two courts, the *Gloucester Journal* continued, were small apartments for the judges, with access directly to their seats in the courtrooms, and a large room for the Counsel, with doors leading to their respective courts. Under each court there were rooms for witnesses, from which they could be called to the witness box to give

evidence. There was also a room for the prisoners, from which there was private access to their bar in the court.

Shire Hall was extensively remodelled in 1896, to provide more accommodation for the ever-growing number of county council staff. The interior of the courtrooms were remodelled and refurbished in the early years of the twentieth century. The old Booth Hall and the hotel in front of it were demolished in 1957, to make way for further extensions to Shire Hall.

In January 1952, Shire Hall, plus the Assize Courts at the rear, were listed and given Grade II status. The courtrooms were later given a separate address from Shire Hall, being described as the Crown Courts, Bearland, Gloucester. Despite their listed status, one of the courtrooms disappeared at some date after this, perhaps as part of the extensive rebuilding work of the 1960s. It can only be hoped that the remaining courtroom's Grade II listing will ensure its survival, if in the future it is decided that Gloucester should no longer have a Crown Court.

Jill Evans

Sources:

Gloucester Journal, 19 August, 26 August, 16 September 1816

A History of the County of Gloucester, Volume IV: The City of Gloucester, ed.

N.M.Herbert (Victoria County History, 1988), pp. 248-251

Hanged at Gloucester, Jill Evans (The History Press, 2011)

www.britishlistedbuildings.co.uk

The Crown Court, designed by Sir Robert Smirke, was actually built by prisoners-of-war from the Napoleonic Peninsular War, presumably French and Spanish.
(Verbal to Ted Wilson from HHJ Jamie Tabor)

Question from a Judge:

Which was the lesser evil, to hear everything that went on in the other court, or to have a replacement building with such poor acoustics that one can hear nothing that is said in it?