



Braintree District Council

Information Sheet:

Braintree Town Hall



A Brief History

Originally, the management of Braintree's affairs was conducted in the old Vestry Hall in St. Michael's Lane, Braintree, but in the 1920s, the idea of building a purpose-built town hall was proposed and the historic site in the old Market Place was selected. The building was the gift of William Julien Courtauld who wanted to create a grand civic building to raise the standard of local values both in architectural building and artistic expression.

W.J. Courtauld was born at Bocking Place and had made many gifts previously to the town of Braintree. The Town Hall, however, exceeded all its predecessors both in cost and ambition. Courtauld had privately expressed a wish to see the amalgamation of Braintree and Bocking brought about, as at the time the Town Hall was built, they were separate authorities for local government purposes. Since medieval times these two sites had been distinct; the Anglo-Saxon magnate Aethelric originally gave Braintree to the Bishop of London whereas Bocking was granted to the see of Canterbury. In his speech at the opening of the new Town Hall, Courtauld commented upon the size of the Council Chamber as some had considered it to be too large; he stated that one reason for this larger chamber was the possibility that Braintree and Bocking would be amalgamated as he felt that sooner or later this was bound to come about. This idea was generally accepted and the amalgamation duly took effect; the first meeting of the new Braintree and Bocking Urban District Council taking place on 17th April 1934 in the Town Hall. It was at this meeting that George Thomas Thorpe Bartram was elected Chairman of the new Council.

The foundation stone for the Town Hall was laid by George Bartram on 16th October 1926 at a ceremony attended by a large audience. The building was designed by E. Vincent Harris who was told by Courtauld that "I only want the best" and the architect certainly provided that.

Vincent Harris was an eminent architect who had designed city halls and public buildings in Manchester, Leeds, Sheffield, Exeter and many other places. Shortly after the completion of Braintree's Town Hall, he was chosen to design government offices at Whitehall, the largest single building in the country to have been built for some 50 years.

The original estimate of the cost of Braintree's Town Hall was in the region of £10,000 but by its completion, this figure had risen to well over £50,000. The foundations, floor and roof were constructed of reinforced concrete and therefore make the building an early example of the use of this material.

Originally, Winston Churchill MP was asked to perform the opening ceremony in the Market Square but instead it was undertaken by The Earl of Crawford and Balcarres, a distinguished artist and politician. After speeches, The Earl of Crawford, G.T. Bartram, Vincent Harris and the Bishop of Chelmsford left the dais and crossed to the new Town Hall where they appeared on the balcony. The Earl of Crawford declared the Town Hall open with the words "I now declare this building open, and dedicate it to the good government and prosperity of your ancient town of Braintree". A special Braintree flag was then hoisted on the Town Hall. Colonel Edward Rugles-Brise, the local Member of Parliament, proposed thanks to the Earl and stated that in 100 years time, he thought that Braintree would have risen in prominence to become a city and that a Guildhall would then be needed. The party then retired to the Institute for lunch during which Courtauld was presented with a gold casket thanking him for his generosity. The gift was the result of 1,703 townspeople contributing their sixpences and shillings to thank him for his kind gesture. The casket is beautifully ornamented with the Courtauld coat of arms, the town arms and a view of the Town Hall.

The new Town Hall soon gained the prominence that it deserved and became the centre of civic life with the first banquet being held on 30th June 1931.

The original interior décor was further enhanced with the addition of the fine ceiling murals painted in the principal rooms. All of these works of art perfectly complement the rich wood panelling and Portland stone used in the building. The Town Hall survives and flourishes to this day as a testament to the generosity of the Courtauld family as well as reflecting the civic pride and artistic expression of the 1920s and '30s.

The Entrance and Ground Floor

The Town Hall is accessed through an imposing stone porch leading to the entrance and reception area.

From this a short staircase ascends to the main ground floor which consists of offices and a large room used as a gallery for exhibitions and displays. In recent times the building has been altered so as to provide a modern lift, large enough for wheelchair use, a ramped rear access and toilet facilities suitable for disabled people.

The Staircase



The Window: The impressive stained glass window on the staircase was created by George Kruger Gray (1880-1943). The window shows the arms of Braintree Urban District Council at the top as a banner mounted on a pole held by a female figure. The figure has upon her head a crown made of symbolic architectural panels. The figure is standing on a verdant base with flowers and the parish church of St Michael's on the left-hand side. Kruger Gray's signature consisted of a painted German pot called a 'Krug'. Kruger Gray produced several stained glass windows including commissions for the Royal Academy of Arts, Manchester Central Library, Kings School Canterbury and the Freemasons Hall in Great Queen Street in London. Kruger Gray worked extensively with Vincent Harris, the architect of the Town Hall.

Wrought Iron Work: The wrought iron work in the entrance hall and on the staircase was carried out by the well known firm of Wippell. Ornamental gates were also erected at the rear of the Town Hall.

On either side of the main staircase are two plaques. One depicts a wheat-sheaf and a plough and represents the part played by agriculture in Braintree's history and the other shows a skein of wool with a shuttle in the centre surrounded by blacksmith's tools. This represents the hugely significant part played by the wool and silk industries together with metal work which was so successfully developed in Braintree, particularly by the firms of Crittall and Lake & Elliot. Both plaques are encircled with beautiful arrays of flowers and fruit.

The Portraits: The two portraits on the staircase show two men closely connected with Braintree and the Town Hall – William Julien Courtauld and George Bartram.

William Julien Courtauld: William Julien Courtauld donated the Town Hall to the town of Braintree. The painting by Maurice Greiffenhagen RA (1862-1931) shows Courtauld in a characteristic modest pose. It was donated by Mrs. Cicely Courtauld in 1928, on the completion of the Town Hall. The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1929.

George Bartram: George Bartram was a prominent figure in the life of Braintree and was instrumental with William Julien Courtauld in getting the Town Hall built. He was the first Chairman of the Council to occupy the new Town Hall in 1928 and accepted the gift of the building on behalf of the inhabitants of Braintree. He also laid the foundation stone for the building in 1927 (pictured right).



The portrait of Bartram now hanging in the Town Hall was painted by Maurice Greiffenhagen. It was originally presented by 1400 friends of Bartram in Braintree and Essex in recognition of fifty years of public service between 1879 and 1929. The portrait shows Bartram sitting at his desk in the Chairman's Room of the Town Hall with the Chairman's gavel at his side. At the base of the portrait is his OBE, awarded in 1937. The painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1930 and subsequently at other prominent galleries.

Chairman's Room



History: The Chairman's Room was the principal office of the Town Hall and housed the Chairman of the Council. Its first occupant was George Bartram in 1928 and he spent eight years as Chairman. The room is connected to the adjacent Council Chamber by a concealed panelled door. Included in the original fixtures and fittings are Upchurch Pottery vases and fine furniture that still exist.

Paintings: Originally, the Chairman's Room had an undecorated ceiling but the prestige of the building demanded that a fine painted ceiling was commissioned soon after the Town Hall opened. The paintings were completed by Sir Henry Rushbury RA in 1937. The main ceiling is principally decorated in a scheme of blue and gilt and shows a richly emblazoned map of the County of Essex. From the centre boss are arranged the points of the compass along with the glowing colours of the Royal Arms, Arms of the See of Chelmsford, the Essex Regiment and those of Braintree itself. This is surrounded by the signs of the zodiac. The design reflects maps of the Elizabethan period. On the lower coves of the ceiling, figures representing the four seasons are portrayed along with the fruits and skies appropriate to the season. Beneath is a cornucopia with lines from James Thompson's 'Seasons'. The main colouring of blue and gold was chosen to blend perfectly with the rich colouring of the walnut panelling.

Panelling: The panelling in the Chairman's Room reflects the prestige of its resident. It is panelled throughout in solid walnut and is further enriched by a carved Georgian doorway and cornice.

The Council Chamber

History

The Council Chamber is the principal room of the Town Hall and was used for its first Council meeting in 1928 and hosted its inaugural banquet on 30 June 1931. The Council Chamber remained at the centre of civic life in Braintree for over fifty years and many a drama took place within its walls.

Panelling

The panelling in the Council Chamber is of the finest oak inlaid with holly. The furniture is of particular note with heavy oak formal tables and chairs bearing a coat of arms on their backs. The Chairman's chair has arms carved with rams' heads as a symbol of strength and the back finials are carved with the heads of owls – a pagan symbol of wisdom. Should the Chairman's strength and wisdom not prevail, he was equipped with a heavy gavel depicting the Braintree Coat of Arms and with the Bocking 'dolphin' cunningly carved onto the handle.



Paintings

The Council Chamber's vaulted ceiling was originally plain, but was soon decorated with a series of important frescoes painted by Maurice Greiffenhagen RA between 1929-30. They are painted onto copper plates which were afterwards fixed to the walls. This method was believed to ensure the permanence of the painting and also enabled the work to be done in the artist's London studio. When the decision to



This mural is a figurative painting of a Roman Emperor or army officer, and represents the march of the Roman Army through Braintree to the conquest of Colchester. The straight Roman roads from London to Bury St. Edmunds and St. Albans to Colchester, which intersect at Braintree, made it an important place for travellers, and many Roman remains have been found in the area.



This mural shows the Battle of Maldon, fought in 991AD between the Danes and the Saxon inhabitants under Earl Brihtnoth. During the battle many men from Braintree fought under Aetheric, a local lord based at Bocking. The Danes had sailed up the River Blackwater to Northey Island where the battle took place. In the mural Aetheric is shown leading his Company and two of his soldiers are seen holding aloft curved 'seaxes' blades which now figure on the Essex coat of arms.



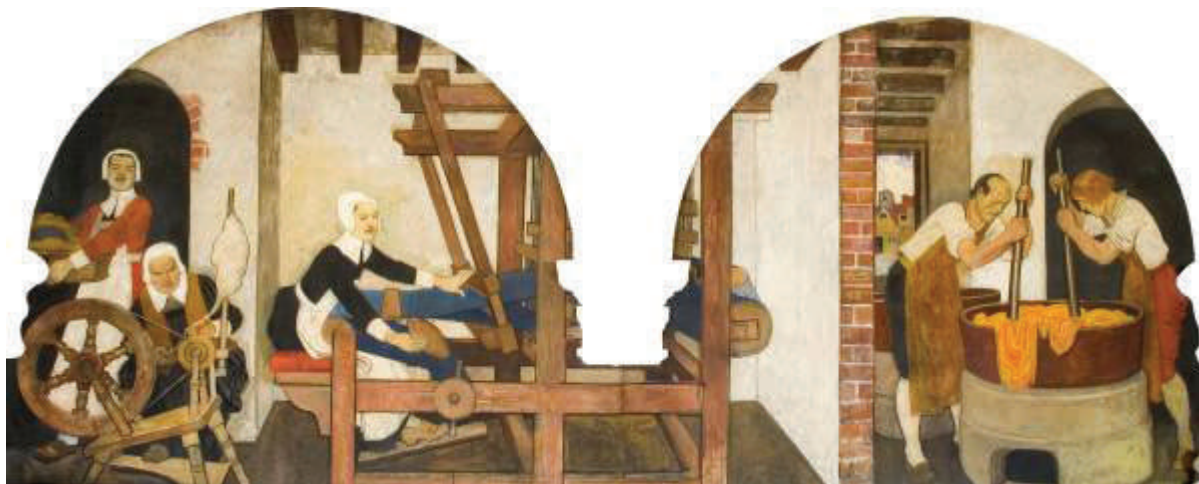
This painting shows that Braintree has always been at the centre of agricultural life in the district even before the granting of the market charter in 1199. The painting shows ploughing and sowing in Saxon times. The figures were taken from a manuscript illustrated by a monk a few years before the Norman Conquest. The farmer is guiding the plough and a bare-footed serf is using the ox-goad.



King John is shown presenting to the Bishop of London, who was Lord of the Manor of Braintree, a charter authorising the holding of a weekly market and an October fair in the town. The Bishop received generous tolls for the holding of these events. This charter was important as it made Braintree the centre of a large agricultural district. Weekly markets have been held ever since, close to the site of the Town Hall.



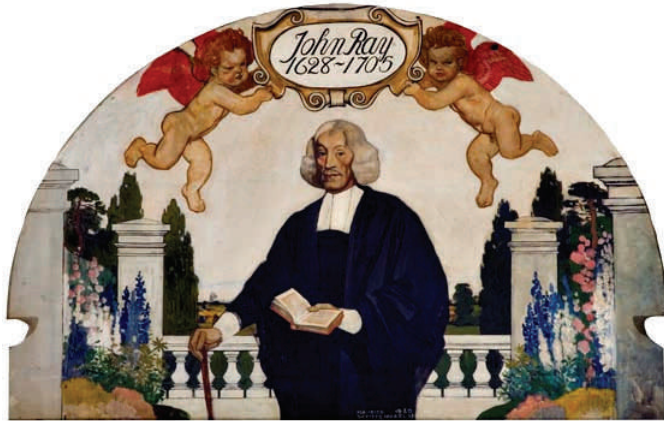
This mural shows Braintree in the reign of Queen Mary when protestants were being persecuted including death by burning and confiscation of property. William Pygot was a butcher denounced as being a protestant. He was arrested and sentenced to be burnt at the stake and the sentence was carried out near the site of the Town Hall on 28th March 1555. The painting shows Pygot chained to the stake and surrounded by faggots which are to be lit from the nearby brazier. Priests are trying to get him to renounce his faith at the last moment. The Sheriff's officer has just read the warrant; the soldiers of Chancellor Rich, who had brought Pygot that morning from Leez Priory, are holding back the townspeople with their pikes.



This painting reminds us that weaving was a prominent trade in Braintree and Bocking. Around 1570, Flemish immigrants brought superior new methods of weaving into the district. By the end of the eighteenth century, this had changed from wool to silk which was introduced to the town by the Courtaulds. The weaving of silk and other fabrics continued throughout much of the twentieth century. The painting shows women weaving at a handloom and men working in the dye house.



This mural shows the sailing of the 'Braintree Company' aboard the 'Lyon' for New England in 1632. They landed at Boston on 12th September and founded a town close by in Massachusetts that they named Braintree. The 'Braintree Company' consisted of many local Puritans as well as people from further afield in Essex. The preaching of Thomas Hooker had persuaded many men and women to leave England and he is shown in the painting wishing Godspeed to Dr William Goodwyn of Bocking, the leader of the company. Behind him is shown John Bridge from Braintree who has been commemorated by a statue at Cambridge, Massachusetts. Hooker followed these settlers to North America four years later.



This portrait shows John Ray the famous naturalist who was probably the most eminent man that Braintree and the adjoining parishes have ever produced. He was born in Black Notley in 1628 and frequently visited Braintree to see his friend Dr Benjamin Allen who lived in a house in Great Square (now the Constitutional Club). There is a permanent exhibition dedicated to John Ray's life and work at Braintree District Museum.

The Committee Rooms

North Committee Room (now called Room 1, Ground Floor)

The panelling in the North Committee Room is in Australian Bean Wood. This wood is rarely seen as it is very hard and brittle and therefore very difficult to work and carve. The panels and grain of the wood used in this room have been greatly admired by many visitors.

Lounge (First Floor)

On the wall above the entrance door is a large decorated coat of arms, which, for some unknown reason, appears not to have been completed before being fixed to the wall.

South Committee Room (First Floor)

The room is panelled in Pear Wood and has a painted ceiling. The decoration includes a framed painting of the colours of the Essex Regiment and records the battles in which it was engaged during the First World War.

Museum

In the Essex Review, a historical journal for the County, a statement appears in January 1928 from Mr Alfred Hills to the effect that a room was being fitted up in the new Town Hall as a museum for Braintree and district and Mr Hills, as joint Honorary Curator, was seeking "objects of antiquarian or historical interest" for display. This appeal for artefacts seems to have been successful as one year later, in January 1929, the same journal records the fact that "the room set apart as a museum is fast becoming a treasure-house of local antiquities." This was the first museum in Braintree, which subsequently moved into the Tudor House, Bradford Street and was later established in its present location in the former Manor Street School.

The Exterior

The Essex Chronicle, in its report of the opening ceremony, stated on 25 May 1928, "The Town Hall is totally unlike any other building in Braintree – stately, ornate and even grand in architecture and design, with internal fittings and fixtures of the most elaborate and costly description and it is intended to lead to the realisation of greater ambition in Braintree affairs."

The exterior of the building, in the Georgian style, is faced with narrow sand-faced English red bricks and the architectural character has been dictated by the traditional work of the neighbourhood. Originally the window frames were oak but these were later painted with white paint.

On the front of the Town Hall are shields, in colour, representing the Arms of the Courtauld and Sharpe families. One shows the date of 1868 and reflects the year of the marriage of W.J. Courtauld's mother Sarah Lucy Courtauld (1843-1906), and the other is dated 1913 - the date of his own marriage to his cousin Miss Constance Cicely Courtauld (1875-1954). The decorated leaden drainpipes are dated 1927.

