THE OLD 'GUILDHALL' AT BLAKENEY

John Wright

The 'Guildhall' in Blakeney is an enigmatic building. Its architecture is a guide to its age but nothing is known about its early history. Last year (2001) BAHS was asked to prepare a revised text to be displayed in the Guildhall. This was done but documentary research has continued and this article presents the results to date – but there is still no break-through on its origins.

Introduction

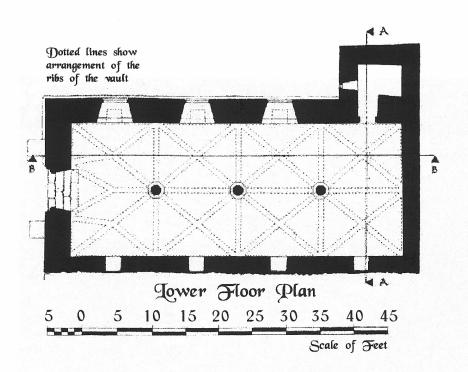
In 2000 it was agreed that a new interpretative panel should be prepared for the 'Guildhall' in Blakeney. English Heritage, the present owners, prepared a new set of plans and the Parish Council, responsible for day-to-day management, asked BAHS to provide the text. In 2001 the new panel was completed and is now on display in the Guildhall, replacing one which had been there for many years.

Documentary research undertaken for the new panel concentrated on four trustee deeds spanning the period 1627 to 1808. Since then research has continued and this article sets out the main findings. Unfortunately, nothing has yet been found relating to the first two centuries of the Guildhall's existence, neither has there been any architectural study of the building. Nevertheless, the article represents the fullest account yet published of the Guildhall's history.¹

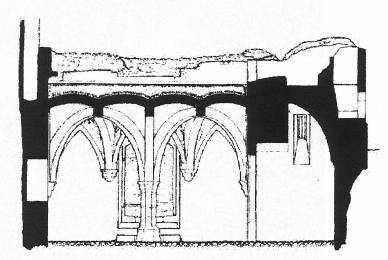
Description

The Guildhall lies near the Quay at Blakeney, just off the High Street. It is classified as an Ancient Monument (No. 119) and has Listed Building status (Grade II*). The single room now remaining appears to be the undercroft of a medieval building, perhaps a merchant's house. The plan shows a room 49 feet long and 20 feet wide. The ceiling is a ribbed vault constructed in brick and supported on three octagonal stone piers. A projection at the south-eastern corner contains a garderobe chute from the first floor and there are indications that it also contained a stair rising upwards from the first floor. If so, the building originally had two stories above the undercroft.² The window embrasures in the east wall and the doorway in the north wall, together with the interior vaulting, all suggest a construction date in the 1300s.

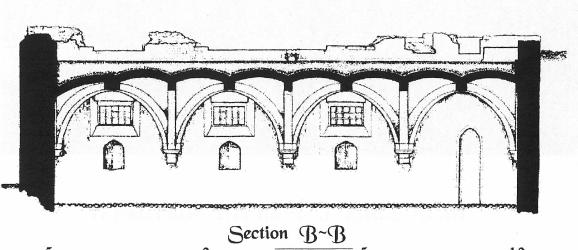
The walls are of flint with stone quoins but little, if any, of the flintwork on the outside appears to be original. The western wall of the building lies adjacent to buildings on the High Street frontage and contains no windows – which might suggest that there were buildings adjacent when the Guildhall was being built. The southern end of the building is built into the steep hill which rises from the Quay so that the first floor may always have had an entrance directly from ground level. Presumably this was the main entrance, for the fine entrance down-slope on the north side leads directly into the supposed undercroft. The eastern wall, the only one to contain windows, was once partially obscured by Mariners' Hill which lay slumped against it. The wall was fully revealed by the Ministry of Works when they took over

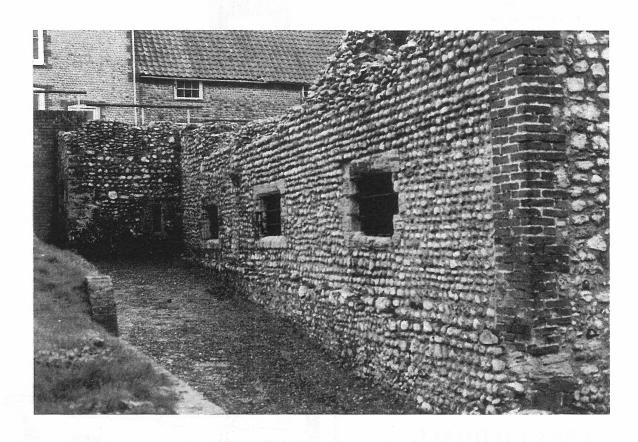


THE GUILDHALL BLAKENEY



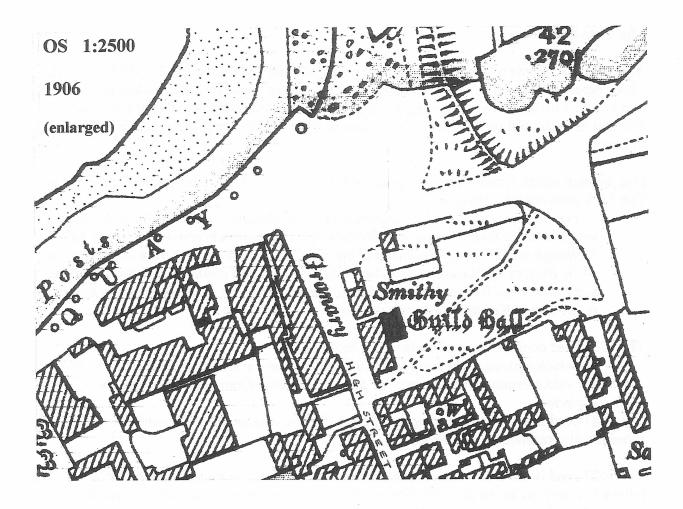
Section A~A







THE GUILDHALL FROM THE NORTHEAST



responsibility for the Guildhall, and Mariners' Hill is now kept in place by a high retaining wall.

Within the undercroft, in both of the side walls, are a series of deep niches. The walls themselves, as well as the ceiling brickwork, appear to have been plastered over, perhaps at the time of construction. The interior was limewashed in 1985 – and cleaned shortly afterwards. There are reports that traces of wall paintings could once be seen but no evidence now remains.

There has been supposition that the bricks in the Guildhall are of foreign origin, brought in during the course of trade with Flanders. It is more likely, however, that the bricks were locally made. Early bricks in England (into the 1300s) were made from alluvial clay; they have characteristic yellow, pink, or purple tinges, and are irregular and poorly fired. The bricks in the Guildhall are of this type. Later bricks were made from boulder clays and had different characteristics, and their quality gradually improved – helped by more advanced techniques from Flanders and north Germany. Because of the poor quality of early bricks their chief function was to provide a cheaper and lighter replacement for stone, and if appearance was a consideration they were plastered over. In a cellar this might not have been necessary; in a merchant's undercroft with an imposing entrance directly to the quayside it would not be surprising to find brick and flint alike plastered over.

The Title Deeds

The main documents relating to the Guildhall are four title deeds dated 1627, 1687, 1751 and 1808 respectively.³ All have the same purpose: to transfer ownership of the building from one group of trustees to a succeeding group, who were to hold it on behalf of the community. The text of each deed follows very closely that of the preceding one, although the first two are in Latin.

One element which remains almost unchanged, for instance, is the description of the building. The 1808 deed contains these words:

... one messuage built with its appurtenances in Blakeney otherwise Snitterley which was formerly Thomas Tower's of Wiveton and is situate between a certain hill called Welburgh on the part of the east and the King's Highway leading from Wellstones up to the Rectory of Blakeney ... on the part of the west and abutts on a certain messuage some time since Robert Hilby's formerly Thomas Barker's towards the south and upon a way called Welstones towards the north ...

The 1750 deed contains the same words but continues:

(of which messuage the head house was called The Tavern) and another house of the said messuage in which now or late are contained four [one word gap] or renteries.

The 1687 deed has the Latin equivalent of the 1751 one, and includes the word 'renteris' subsequently translated as 'renteries'.

The 1627 deed is more difficult to read but the text is clearly the same, although Robert Hilbye is described as 'smyth' and Thomas Barker as 'carpenter'. It can also be seen that the one-word gap in the later deed is filled in this one by the word 'shops':

... quatuor les shoppes vel rentoris ...

It is not clear exactly what is meant by the term. They may have been shops in the present-day sense but it is more likely that the word is being used as a general term to cover workshops or even residential uses.

And where were these four tenancies? Almost certainly they were adjacent, either to the south or more likely, perhaps, to the west between the Guildhall and the High Street. A location on the this frontage would appear to be a good one for commercial purposes, then as now. In which case, where was the 'head house'? The most reasonable supposition is that the Guildhall was the main building on the premises, and was therefore used at one time as a tavern.⁴

The Trustees

All four deeds name the new trustees to whom the property is being conveyed. In 1808 Edward Browne and Thomas Warnes convey the Guildhall to 25 new trustees, or 'feoffees'. Edward Browne, formerly of Blakeney but now a London cornfactor, and Thomas Warnes, a Blakeney ship carpenter, were the last two survivors of the 25 trustees who took over in 1751. The new list for 1808 includes Richard Gough, the rector, and some of the principal inhabitants, Temples and Breretons among them. An endorsement records that on 9th July 1808 livery of seisin was delivered to Richard Gough and Thomas Temple on behalf of all the new trustees – all expressly described as parishioners of Blakeney.

The deed provides that when the number of trustees is reduced to five then they, or a majority of them, should convey the property to 25 other trustees to be indifferently chosen out of the parishioners of Blakeney. If any such deed was made it has not survived – or at least it has not reached any known repository.

The deed of 1751 conveys the Guildhall from William Church (the only surviving trustee) to 25 new trustees, a list again headed by the rector and principal inhabitants, such as John Springold, Thomas Temple and four members of the Browne family. This time possession is granted to Thomas Temple, Samuel Browne and Thomas Narborough. The document is dated 28 February 1750, and has previously been catalogued as 1750, but reference to the 24th regnal year of George II makes it clear that the actual year is 1751, for not until 1752, when the Gregorian calendar was introduced, did the new year start on 1st January rather than 25th March.

The 1687 deed relates that Henry Ward, mariner, has transferred to 25 new trustees the property that he and others had received in 1627 from William Wilch, then of Cley, Thomas Barker, senior, and William Mayden, mariners all three. John Springold, Robert Narborough and Robert Makins took possession of the property on 24th June, witnessed by Christopher Seaman, Richard Manser and Robert Lowde.

The earliest extant deed was drawn up in 1627 by William Wilch, Thomas Barker and William Mayden in favour of 42 new trustees, including of course, Henry Ward. This deed, unlike the later ones, also lists all the trustees named in the previous deed of 1582 (now lost): 36 of them in addition to the three who survived till 1627. Moreover, if the interpretation is correct, the 1627 deed says that the 1582 deed had named Thomas Barker, John Barker and Thomas Whight as the donors. It would be reasonable to assume that these three were the survivors of an even earlier group of trustees established by a deed drawn up some 40-50 years before 1582. The three cannot be the original owners for according to the deeds themselves the property had belonged to Thomas Tower. It is worth noting that the gap between 1582 and 1627 is 45 years; if the same period had elapsed up to 1582 then the previous deed would have been prepared in 1537 – only a year before the dissolution of the nearby Carmelite Friary.

The Guildhall as a Charity.

The four deeds described above show that the Guildhall is not a property subject to the usual sale and purchase procedures – it is clearly being run as a charity. On the evidence of the deeds it would be reasonable to assume that it was Thomas Tower who first set up the charity for the benefit of the local community. As the 1808 deed relates, the trustees are to hold the property:

in trust for the town or village of Blakeney otherwise Snitterley and to apply the rents issues and profits of the said premises yearly in such sort manner and form as the said feoffees or the majority of them shall think fit and proper ...

which is not really a very onerous condition.

It can be supposed that the rents obtained from letting the property (or properties) would have been applied to helping the poor of the parish and also, perhaps, to maintaining the building. In practice there is not very much evidence of either.

Strictly speaking, a charity ought to maintain records of income and expenditure and of leases granted. No financial accounts of this kind seem to have survived, although in the latter part of the Guildhall's history there are indications of what was happening – and coal features prominently in the story. The evidence lies in the various church terriers from 1706 onwards.⁵

The first terrier for Blakeney with Glandford, for 1613, contains no reference to the Guildhall. There appear to be no more terriers for the parish until that for 1706 which, after listing the assets of the benefice, records:

Several houses and [faint text] belonging to the parish of Blakeney for the use of the poor.

Imprimis. The Town houses inhabited by [7 named people]

Item A house called the Guild Hall rented at ten shillings p. a. now in the

h..... of Mr Arthur Brown

The terrier of 1716 has the same entry for the Guild Hall but says of the townhouses that they lie abutting on the way leading to Langham and Morston on ye west which puts them on the east side of the present Westgate Street.

In 1723 the Guild Hall was still being rented by Arthur Browne for the use of the poor but by 1729 there was a new tenant: John Brerton of Laurensett, to be followed in 1735 by William Garrett of Wiveton. Then in 1747, 1753, 1760, 1763 and 1770 the tenant was Mr Thomas Temple for a payment of one chaldron of coal. After this comes a succession of names and rents:

1777 Thomas Bond @ 7 3/4 chaldron of coal

1784 Unoccupied

1791 Henry Chaplin @ 2 guineas

1794 Henry Chaplin, merchant @ 1 3/4 chaldron of coal

1801 Robert Brereton, merchant @ 2 guineas

which last entry was repeated in 1806, 1813, 1820 and 1827.

The terrier for 1834 notes that there was a house or vault called the Guild Hall used by John P Starling at a rent of £6 and an unclear number of shillings, the complete sum no doubt being £6 5s as given in the entries for 1845 and 1865. In 1886 Francis Kerrison was renting at £4 but when the final mention of the Guild Hall comes in the terrier of 1894 the rent is only 5 shillings per year, payable by Messrs Page and Turner.

Early in the nineteenth century the Charity Commissioners reported on the Guildhall charity as follows:⁶

'There is in Blakeney a vault capable of containing about 60 chaldrons of coals, called the Guildhall. This tenement is in the occupation of Messrs Brereton, coal merchants of Blakeney. They stated to us that they were unable to find the lease, but that a lease had been granted to the father of Mr R J Brereton, one of the present occupiers, for a rent of 63 bushels of coals to be delivered every year to 63 poor families in Blakeney [which they had done since they commenced occupation in 1816]. As it is suggested that a higher rent may be obtained than the value of 63 bushels of coals, we have recommended that steps should be taken for letting this

property at its full value, unless the lease can be produced, and we have reason to believe that Messrs Brereton will not throw any obstacles in the way'.

How does this statement compare with the evidence of the terriers? At 36 bushels to the chaldron, 63 bushels would be exactly 1 ¾ chaldrons, the amount chargeable to Henry Chaplin in 1794. (One wonders whether the rent had really dropped from 7 ¾ chaldrons – 279 bushels - in 1777 or whether there was a copying error by someone preparing the terrier). Yet in 1801 Robert Brereton was paying not in bushels but a sum of £2 per year, an entry which remained unaltered through till 1827. If the two rents were equivalent, then coal would have been valued at £1.2s 10¼ d per chaldron. This is not too far away from the £1.6s being asked in an advertisement in the Norfolk Chronicle⁷ in 1780, so perhaps £2 was charged to anyone not using the 'vault' for coal.

The published version of the Charity Commissioners' report is dated 1815 - 1835 so it is not clear when it was actually written. By 1834, however, the rent had been trebled to £6 – but Messrs Brereton were not paying it, John Starling was. There is, therefore, a reasonable correlation between the terriers and the Commissioners' report.

Manorial Records

The Guildhall does not seem to be featured in any of the manorial court records (though by no means all have been read) but it is mentioned in some relatively late listings of quitrents. Quitrents often originated in medieval times as payments in lieu of manorial service due to the Lord.) A listing for 1763 contains details of quitrents payable to three local manors, Snitterley Astley, Snitterley Calthorpe and Wiveton Ducis, but does not indicate to which manor each rent is payable. There are some 40 entries for Blakeney, amongst which is a payment of 6d due from the 'town' of Blakeney, the only payment of this particular value.

A similar list for 1789 has Blakeney 'churchwardens' instead of 'town' but a later hand has crossed out 'churchwardens' and substituted 'Trustees for Guild Hall' followed by eight, not wholly legible, names. The list for 1791 repeats the revised entry and this time the names are clear: Michael Jackson senior, Michael Jackson junior, John Crofts, Thomas Warnes, Francis Wells, Thomas Potter, Edward Browne and Thomas Hooke, all names which appear in the Trustee deed of 1751 – and possibly the only survivors. The entries for 1796 and 1803 revert to 'Blakeney churchwardens' with the payment still at 6d.

Then for 1816 there is a 'Suit Roll of the freehold and copyhold tenants' of the three manors which contains no values at all but does show the manor to which each payment should be made. Some 30 copyhold tenants are listed (with updating annotations) and then as many freeholders (without annotations), amongst which is: 'Blakeney Trustees for the Guild Hall' with a mark in the column for Snitterley Calthorpe. This raises the possibility that some reference to the property might exist in the early records of the Calthorpe estate. However, there are few such deeds relating to Blakeney and no early reference to the Guildhall seems to have been reported.

On the Enclosure Award of 1824 a few manorial properties are listed, but these do not include the Guildhall.

The Townhouses

So what happened to the four *renteries* noted in the trustee deeds? Is it possible that they could have been used as almshouses to accord with the general intention of the charity? The churchwardens' accounts of 1666-1695 include occasional expenses for maintaining a townhouse but give no hint as to where it lay. The glebe terrier of 1716, however, makes clear that the townhouses were then situated in Westgate Street.

Yet that might not have been their original location. There is a later deed of 1765 by which the Rector, churchwardens and principal inhabitants leased to Philip Evelington for 99 years some old walls belonging to the parish. These old walls were the remains of a ruinated townhouse or almshouse belonging to the parish which the parishioners do not think worth repairing. They were described as adjoining to the east end of a tenement or cottage belonging to Philip Evelington on the east side of the High Street. Unfortunately, this does not sound like a description of the Guildhall; moreover, the list of principal inhabitants includes some not party to the trustee deed of 1751.

The fate of the four *renteries* therefore remains an open question pending further investigation.

Why 'Guild Hall'?

Perhaps the earliest reference to the name 'Guild Hall' is on the back of the 1627 trustee deed where the words *Deed belonging to the Guild Hall* appear – but this text has been added at a later date. The name may have no validity whatever, but it is at least possible that the building did have some connection with a former guild. It seems unlikely that Blakeney was ever large enough to have had a strictly occupational guild, although it has been suggested that there is evidence for a 'fishermen's guild' formed, or existing, in 1516. This claim needs further investigation, as does the possibility that the name derives from being used as a meeting place for one (or all) of the guilds known to have been based at the church.

Such guilds varied widely in size and wealth, and in their range of activities, but all of them ensured a decent funeral for their (former) members and commemorative masses thereafter. They also provided feasts and entertainment for members and help for the local needy, and some guilds established charities. They functioned under the patronage of a saint and usually contributed to the upkeep of that part of the church containing their altar. Indeed, some church aisles may have been built to accommodate a guild rather than extra worshippers. The Reformation severely curtailed the role of guilds, especially after the suppression of chantry chapels in 1547.

In Blakeney there were once three religious gilds,¹¹ dedicated to St Nicholas (the principal dedication), Our Lady (with an altar in the south aisle) and St Thomas (in the north aisle). One or more of these gilds could have used the Tavern, lately given to the community at large, for their meetings – and what better place for their festivities? A rich gild might even own property. In 1521 the rector of Cley was granted the 'possession' which lay between Cley churchyard, a messuage belonging to the Gild of St Mary of Cley and demesne land of the lordship of Cley.¹²

There is no indication that any of the Blakeney gilds owned property, although they did receive bequests. Simon Barker, for instance, in his will of 1526/7, left 20d to the gild of Our Lady and the same to the gild of St Thomas. ¹³ By the time of the Dissolution, though, their days were numbered. John Barker's will, dated February 1536/7, recognises this for he left: ¹⁴

...to the gilde of Saynt Nicholas & the gilde of our Lady in Snyterleye to either of them so they contynewe 6s 8d & if they contynewe not my said legace to them to be disposed be myn executors.

So the Guildhall name might have some factual basis: it is not impossible that its status as a charity may derive from its use by one of the religious guilds based in Blakeney church.

People

If the Guildhall began life as a merchant's house – who was the merchant? The Guildhall was a substantial structure in a prime position and only the most wealthy inhabitants could have afforded to build it. Moreover, the village was really quite small, even in its heyday as a port, and at any one time there were very few dominant families. The best source of such information in the 1300s is the poll tax of 1379 – though this is probably a little late for the construction of the Guildhall.

The poll tax was charged according to means so that sums could range from 4d up to a maximum of 10 marks (£6 13 4d). All adults were to pay, except for married women, who were counted with their husbands, and genuine paupers. Very few people paid the higher rates and the normal values in smaller communities were 6s 8d, 3s 4d, 2s, 1s and 6d, as well as the most common payment of 4d.

By way of comparison, in the 23 Holt Hundred parishes with complete records, ¹⁵ nobody paid even as much as 6s 8d. Only five parishes had someone paying 3s 4d. These are listed below, with the number of people paying 2s shown in brackets:

| 2 | (3) |
|---|-----|
| 1 | (3) |
| 1 | (1) |
| 1 | (0) |
| 1 | (0) |
| | 1 1 |

The Blakeney names were:

| 3s 4d | Robert Rust | Merchant |
|-------|-----------------|----------|
| 2s | Nicholas Bishop | Merchant |
| 2s | Simon Ward | Merchant |
| 2s | Thomas Suoyn | |

Perhaps one of these families built the Guildhall? Robert Rust is clearly the dominant resident. Not only was he the richest but he also features in national records. In 1376 he hired a ship to bring salt into Blakeney but the ship was lost when Rust over-ruled one of the master's decisions. Perhaps this incident came to mind four years later when, as ship master

to Sir John Arundel, he was required to put to sea in bad weather: the ship was wrecked and both men were drowned. ¹⁷

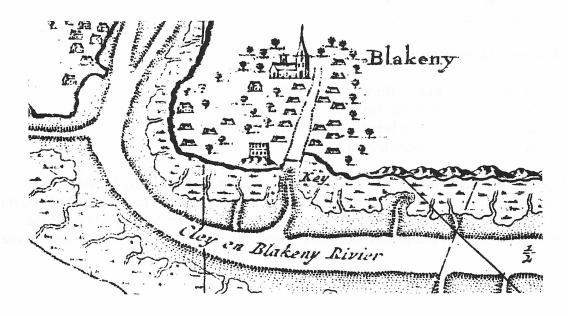
The trustee deeds show that Thomas Tower was once the owner of the Guildhall. Is there any evidence to suggest when this might have been? The first problem is that the records contain several different but similar surnames. Even the first of the trustee deeds (1627) has Tover rather than Tower. Neither has yet been matched in the local records, but there are references in the Patent Rolls to John Tobur (1329) and Thomas Tuber (1352), and to Richard Tobe of Wiveton who paid 4d in the 1379 poll tax. Somewhat later, in 1403/4, a Richard Tubber of Wiveton sold some land in Blakeney very close to the Guildhall. It is tempting to link all these into the same family (if only on the basis that in some medieval hands a double 'b' can look very like a 'w'). John and Thomas both provided land for the Carmelite Friary in Blakeney, and a reference (1353) to Thomas Tuber of Snitterley, chief constable of Holt Hundred, one owned the Guildhall but actually built it?

The trustee deeds also mention a messuage *late Robert Hilby's, formerly Thomas Barker's* which abutted the Guildhall. The 1627 deed describes Hilby as a *smyth* and Barker as a *carpenter*. Once again the Hilby name may not be quite accurate, for in February 1483/4 a Robert Kilby left to his son Thomas all his *materia ad fabrica* which (if the reading is correct) might indicate the tools of his smithy. A Robert Kylby also appears as a witness to one of the Calthorpe estate deeds dated 1476/7. The Barker family was a prolific one in the Blakeney area in the sixteenth century and Thomas was a particularly common forename. One such was living at the end of the 1400s.

Maps

The 1586 map of Blakeney Haven²² shows the village of Blakeney but the buildings seem to be schematic and there is none which can be identified specifically as the Guildhall.

More useful is the Collins chart²³ of 1693 which shows Blakeney church, the High Street with buildings either side, including one which might represent the remains of the Friary, and one other large building. This stands prominently in the position now occupied by the Guildhall. It is unlikely that an accurate representation was intended but the building appears to have two storeys and no roof (unless flat), which could well have been the case at that date.



The 1769 map of Blakeney²⁴ clearly shows the Guildhall but depicts it as if in its present condition, more of a ruin than a roofed building. It stands alone on Mariners Hill with no separate building between it and the High Street.

Final Comment

At this point, perhaps, there should be a potted history of the Guildhall as a building, but there are still too many uncertainties to make this worthwhile. What does seem to be clear is that over the centuries the charity function of the Guildhall has disintegrated, perhaps in step with the property itself. Were no proceeds ever diverted towards maintenance of the building?

In the later nineteenth century one can imagine that the building became more of a liability than an asset, and perhaps 25 new trustees were not easily found in those circumstances. Meanwhile the deeds themselves were lodged with the church records, no doubt before the creation of the parish council in 1894. In any case, in 1751 and 1808 (but not earlier) the Rector's name was first on the list of trustees and so he might have been expected to keep the deeds. It seems a little odd, therefore, that the Charity Commissioners' report (quoted earlier) includes extracts from the deeds of 1627 and 1687 but makes no reference to the later ones.

In the twentieth century the Guildhall had various incidental uses until taken over by English Heritage. More recently, in December 1997, the Charity Commission confirmed that the Guildhall, donor unknown, would be removed from their list of charities.

Acknowledgement

The author would like to thank Elizabeth Rutledge for help with sources and lines of enquiry.

NOTES

6

- A shorter account by Peter Wordingham appears in the Glaven Valley Newsletter for October 1998.
- 2 From notes in Norfolk County Council's Sites and Monuments Record (No. 6133).
- 3 Norfolk Record Office (NRO) PD.619.82.1-4.
- 4 An alternative suggestion is that foundations once visible on top of Mariners Hill were those of an inn (SMR No. 12287).
- 5 Glebe terriers in the NRO have the following references:

ANW.15.2.45 1613 DN.TER.21.2.1-33 1706 – 1933 PD.619.28. 1753 – 1827 (selected dates)

Reports of the Commissioners appointed to inquire concerning Charities and Education of the Poor in England and Wales, Vol. XXIII, 18151-1835, Norfolk.

- Quoted by Richard Kelham in *Blakeney in the Eighteenth Century*, BAHS, 2nd edition, 2002, p.22.
- 8 NRO MS 19623 containing quitrents for various dates.
- 9 NRO PD.619.79 (MF 713/12) Overseers' Accounts, 1666-1695.
- 10 NRO PD.619.84.

11 Ken Farnhill, Guilds and the Parish Community in Late Medieval East Anglia, 1470-1550, York Medieval Press, 2001.

12

- Norwich A/D Will, Simon Barker, 1526/7, Randes 341.
- NCC Will, John Barker, 1536/7, Mingaye 71-72.
- Carolyn Fenwick, Ed, *The Poll Taxes of 1377, 1379 and 1381*, Part 1, Beds Leics, 1998, Part 2, Lincs-Westmorland, British Academy, OUP, 2001, (Part 3 forthcoming).
- 16 Cal. Close Rolls, 1376.
- Walter Rye, 'A Norfolk Shipmaster, 1379-1380', Norfolk Archaeology, Vol. XXII, 1926.
- Hampshire Record Office, Calthorpe Papers, 26.M.62, T2/290.
- 19 Cal. Patent Rolls, 1353.
- Norwich A/D Will, Robert Kylby, 1483/4, Roper 45 & 69.
- 21 Hampshire Record Office, Calthorpe Papers, 26.M.62, T2/330.
- Map of Blakeney Haven, 1586. Various copies exist, including a modern one by Godfrey Sayers (from whom prints may be obtained).
- Grenville Collins, *Great Britain's Coasting Pilot*, 1693, although the extract shown is from a Dutch version of the Collins chart (produced by Gerard van Keulen).
- Plan of Blakeney parish by William and Corba Cranefield, 1769. The original is in private ownership but a tracing (not wholly complete) is in the NRO (BL 49/1).

