

Suffolk Institute of Archaeology.

THE GUILD HALL, OF CORPUS CHRISTI, LAVENHAM.

BY JOHN SHEWELL CORDER.

THE origin of Trade Guilds dates back very far into the past, and it is unknown when they were first instituted. In proof, however, of their high antiquity, mention is made of them in Domesday, and there is an instance of a Guild existing at Abbotsbury, in Dorsetshire, in the days of Canute.

They were founded by charters granted either by the King, or the Lords of the Manor.

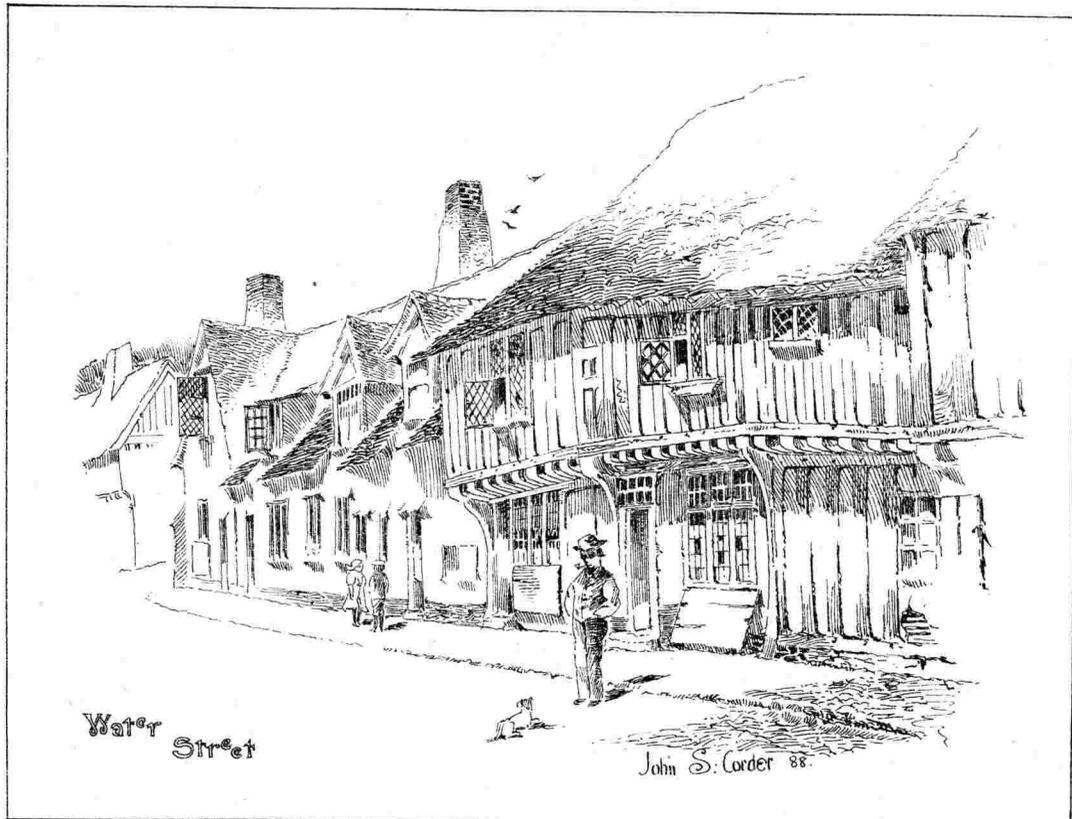
Though the primary object of these Guilds or Companies was for the benefit of Trade, and the strengthening and cementing of commercial interests, yet they were inseparably connected with the Church, receiving from the Priest a holy dedication, whilst in their Halls were performed Miracle Plays, the Setting out of Pageants, and shows, and acts of a similar nature. They had also in connection with their institutions, on the Saint's day of Corpus Christi, gorgeous processions, in which were carried the Tabernacles of the Guilds, which Tabernacles were sometimes lodged in the churches, as in the case of the

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Tabernacle of the Guild of Corpus Christi at Ipswich, which we read was lodged at the church of S. Mary-at-the-Tower. Besides these processions they had feasts, and an inventory of the utensils used by the last-named Guild is preserved. As years rolled on, and the Guilds became rich, not only by the accumulation of their own funds, but by the legacies of pious patrons, these religious exercises became so elaborate as to attract the attention and excite the horror of the rigid Protestants of Henry VIII. reign, so much so indeed, that in or about the year 1547, an Act was passed abolishing all these confederations which were, it was said, of superstitious foundation, and as if to make their complete eradication certain, in most instances their properties were confiscated, and sold or granted by way of gift to the King's courtiers. In spite of the Act, however, some of these Guilds survived for several years.

As regards Lavenham, we find that in the 15th and 16th centuries it had become a place of great mercantile importance. It was a centre of the Wool Trade, and the manufacture of serges and blue cloths was largely carried on, being under the immediate protection of the de Veres, Earls of Oxford, and High Chamberlains of England, who held the Lordship of Lavenham from the reign of Henry II., and continued to do so till the reign of Elizabeth, when Edward, the 17th Earl, who was a noted spendthrift, sold Lavenham to Paul d'Ewes, father of the antiquary Sir Simon D'Ewes.

Lands at Lavenham were held at the making of the Domesday Book by the first de Vere, one Aubrey, who married, it is rumoured, a half sister of William the Conqueror, Beatrix de Guisnes, and it is recorded of them that in 1100 they founded the Priory of Earls Colne, their son Aubrey built, it is said, Hedingham Castle. The third de Vere, grandson of the first Aubrey, was created Earl of Oxford in the reign of Henry II., and an unbroken line of 20 Earls in succession continued till the year 1704, when the estates fell into the hands of an heiress, and she dying without issue the line became extinct.



Water
Street

John S. Corder 88.

· WATER · STREET · LAVENHAM ·

COWELL, LINTAS, IPSWICH.



Lady St.
Lavenham
John Corder

LADY · STREET · LAVENHAM ·

COWELL. ILLUSTRATION.

Though the family made Hedingham Castle their principal Seat, they had also a residence in Lavenham, called the Manor House, the foundations of which may still be seen peeping out in the meadow in front of Lavenham Hall, which doubtless formed at one time part of the original Mansion.

Much of the prosperity of the place was owing to this family, whilst the magnificence of the Church indicates their interest for the spiritual welfare of the people. A walk through the streets will convince us of its former prosperous state. The houses remain much the same as they were when first built, constructed of oak with overhanging upper storeys, and shew by the unsparing employment of carving upon them, the opulence of their original owners. It will be seen, then, that such an important town as Lavenham could not be without its Guilds, of which there were three:—the Guild of St. Peter, granted by John, the 16th Earl, having its Hall in High Street; Holy Trinity, granted by the same Earl, with its Hall in Prentice Street; and the Guild of Corpus Christi, granted by John, the 15th Earl, in 1529, having its Hall in the Market Place. The last named is the most ancient of the three, and was the first Guild Hall erected in Lavenham.

This John, the 15th Earl, married Elizabeth Trussell, heiress of Sir Edward Trussell, Knight, and she ably assisted her husband in his pious benefactions. John died in 1539, leaving eight children, four boys and four girls, and was buried beneath a handsome marble tomb in the Chancel of Hedingham Church. The monument is now placed against the North wall, but it originally stood in the centre of the Chancel.

The Hall of Corpus Christi is a beautiful example of the timber framed buildings of the 16th century, and injured and mutilated as it is, it gives us a good idea of the appearance and construction of the buildings of the middle ages.

The Building occupies a commanding position on the South side of the Market Place, at the point where it is

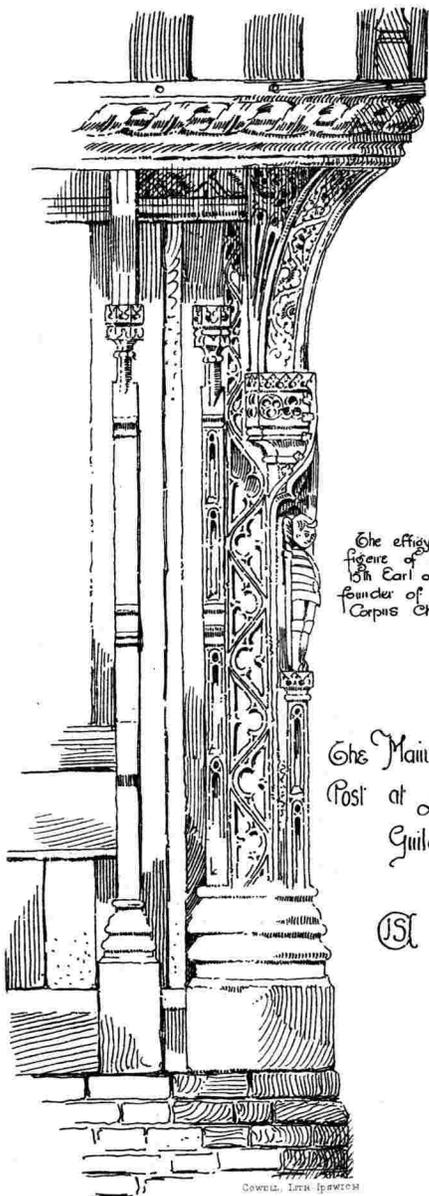
penetrated by Lady Street, and has a frontage of 48 ft. to the former and 27 ft. to the latter street. These dimensions refer to the main structure, though it is probable that the buildings abutting upon it, and now used as cottages, though inferior in architecture, were at one time connected with it. The main front originally commanded an uninterrupted view of the spacious Market Place, though of later years a row of houses has been interposed between it and the Market Cross, thus materially affecting its position.

It consists of a ground floor with cellars underneath one portion, and an overhanging upper storey, ceiled at the plate level, the roof space over being lighted by small windows in the gable ends. The construction is as follows: the walls to cellars and up to ground floor line are very thick, and built of brick and rubble united by mortar, as are also the massive chimneys. On this substructure was placed oak framing ingeniously morticed and tenoned together and pegged with oak pins, the interstices of the framework being filled with clay and chopped straw and wattles intertwined, and the durability of this construction is marvellous.

The first floor overhangs the ground floor 18 inches, and this is continued on both frontages by means of an angle beam and corner post, the joists being framed into the former, and showing at right angles to the wall all round; thus carrying the framing above, which rests on a beam beautifully carved with twisted leaf pattern. The roof would be covered with either tiles or thatch.

All the windows, except the small lights under the overhanging first floor, were in the form of projecting bays, but of these only one exists: namely, that on the ground floor to Lady Street. The gables originally projected over the wall face and had carved barge boards, but only that to the porch remains.

The chief glory and interest of the exterior is the elaborate corner post, on which is carved a small full length effigy of John, the 15th Earl, its noble founder, in plate



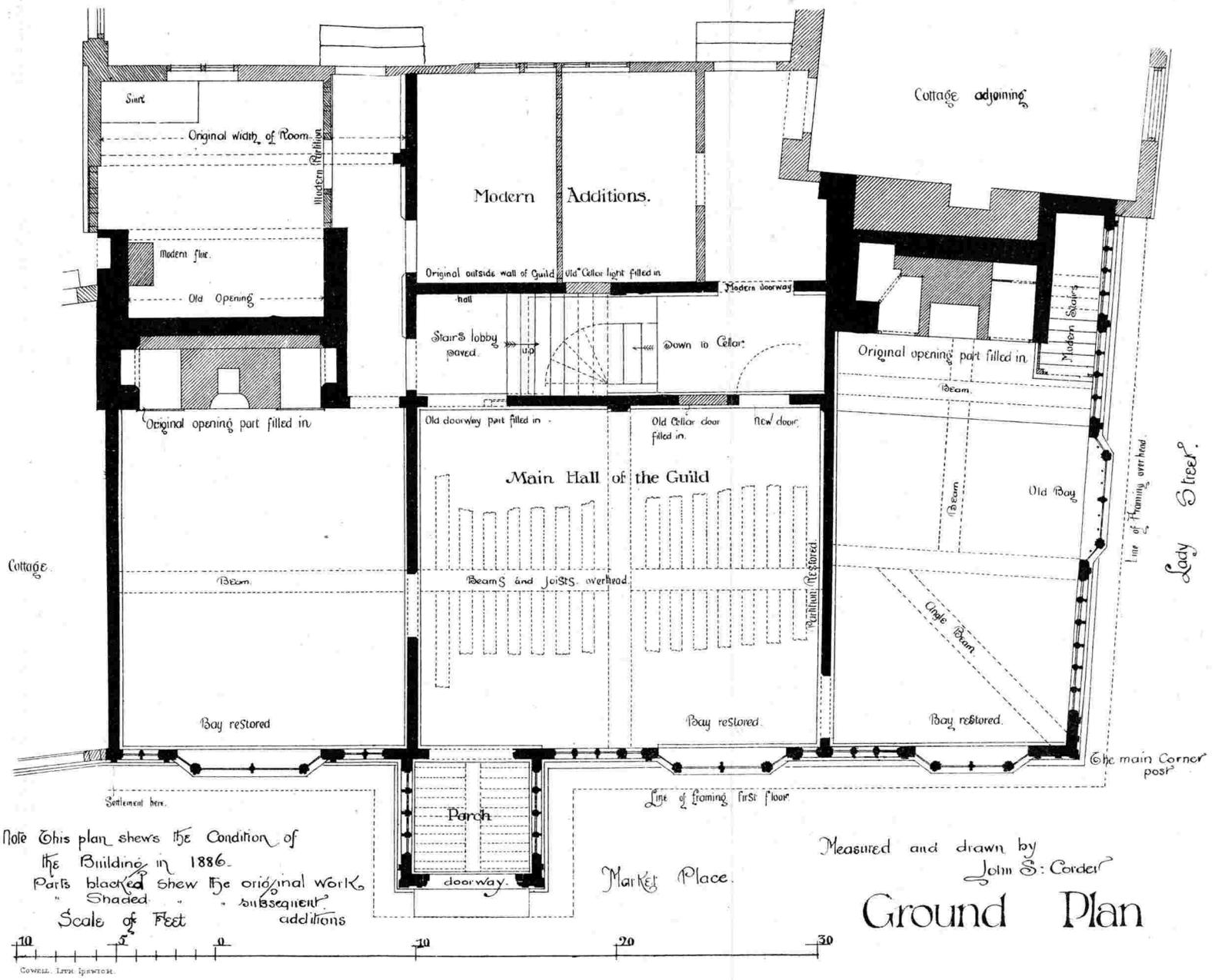
The effigy is the figure of John de Vere 5th Earl of Oxford founder of the Guild of Corpus Christi at Lavenham.

The Main Corner Post at Lavenham Guild hall.

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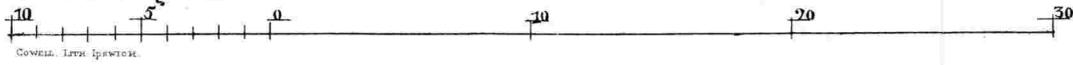
COWELL, LINTON & PARTNER

Brick & rubble.



Note This plan shows the Condition of
 the Building in 1886.
 Parts blacked show the original work.
 Shaded " " subsequent additions.
 Scale of Feet

Measured and drawn by
 John S. Corder
 Ground Plan



armour. He stands on a pedestal or buttress beneath a cusped and crocketed canopy, the underside of which is groined in imitation of stone roofing. In his right hand he grasps a distaff on which may be seen some unspun yarn, and in his left bears the scroll or charter of the Guild. The post is richly decorated with sunk tracery and Tudor flouriations.

Entering by the beautiful Porch, at the corners of which are two angle posts of similar design to the one above mentioned, but having beneath the canopies, in place of effigies, two lions sejant rampant, emblematical of the Corpus Christi, we find ourselves in the main Hall of the Guild; a room without fireplace, 20 feet by 17 feet, with elaborately moulded beams and joists overhead. It was here that the merchants met and transacted business.

On either side of the Hall are two smaller rooms, offices of the Guild, each having a large open fireplace.

In the rear of the left hand one was probably the kitchen, from the vast size of the fireplace, being over 10 feet in width.

The central Hall communicates with the staircase by a door immediately opposite the entrance. This staircase leading to the first floor is formed of solid balks of wood, sawn through diagonally, and resting on bearers. The arrangement of the rooms above follows that below, a small room being over the porch. Two of these rooms have large open fireplaces.

In the room to the right of the central Hall are remains of linen pattern panelling, and doubtless the whole of the walls on the ground floor were covered with this, or similar material. The upper rooms probably showed the timber framing inside, plastered between the studs.

The doorways are all Tudor headed, those on ground floor having carved spandrels, the doors were ledged and boarded, hung on massive band hinges, of which several examples exist. The outer door of the Porch was probably a large one with a smaller door cut in the centre, similar to examples which still exist in the town.

The Windows were filled with glass in lead quarries, and in the upper lights rich blazonings and coats of arms were doubtless inserted.

Beneath the principal staircase to the first floor is a brick stair leading to the cellar: this is a most interesting apartment, about 16 feet 10 inches by 31 feet 9 inches, 7 feet 3 inches high; lighted by three small iron-barred windows. In the walls of the cellar are small recesses about two feet wide and one foot two inches deep, arched over with Tudor heads in brick, and having seats in them one foot three inches above the floor, but for what purpose they served remains doubtful. Besides these there are other recesses for lamps and cupboards.

In this cellar it is believed that Dr. Taylor was confined when on his way to his place of martyrdom, on Aldham Common, in 1555, and till recently an old post existed to which it is said he was chained.

After the Guild was abolished, the building passed successively through the stages of Town Hall, Prison, and Workhouse; falling into private hands it was converted into cottages, and finally a Granary and Wool-store.

The Building is now the property of W. C. Quilter, Esq., M.P., who is restoring it with a view to its future preservation. Much has been already done, but the restoration is still far from complete, and it is hoped that ere long this interesting relic of Mediæval Domestic Architecture will be adapted to some purpose suitable to its Historical interest.



HIGH STREET, LAVENHAM.