

THE OLD MOOT HALL AT SUDBURY.

BY W. W. HODSON.

ALTHOUGH the oldest Sudbury Corporate Charter, granted for the loyalty of the inhabitants, only dates from the time of Queen Mary, the town was possessed of a Mayor and Corporation at a much earlier period. This fact is referred to in several of the Charters, which were granted by Mary, Elizabeth, Cromwell, Charles II., and James II. Mary's Charter commences thus:—"Our Towne of Sudbury is an old and ancient Towne, and having in it from time out of mind for the better ruling and government of the same one Mayor, six Aldermen, four-and-twenty Burgesses, two Sergeants, one Bailiff, two Constables, and other Common Officers, by the which the men and inhabitants therof from time out of mind have been ruled and governed. . . . Nevertheless by the report of credible persons the deeds, writings, and letter patents of our p'genyto^s (progenitors) of the gifts and grant of the liberties and privileges aforesaid, for lack of good and safe custody of the same have been embezzled and conveyed away, from the want whereof some doubt hereafter arise whether our Towne of Sudbury be sufficiently incorporated of one Mayor, &c." Among the Corporation records is a warrant (the writing much faded and defaced) dated 1274, directed to the Mayor and Constables ("Maiori et constabulari Ville de Sudburie") for the apprehension of a prisoner. Archbishop Sudbury, in his Regulations and Ordinances for the proper government of the Leper Hospital, at Sudbury, in 1372, appoints

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as Visitors the Mayor and "the Spiritual Father of the Church of S. Gregory." In 1433 there was a Hermitage in S. Gregory's Churchyard, in "a solitaire place," and there is a petition extant to the Bishop of the Diocese for the admission of a hermit, from John Hunt, Mayor of the town and certain "Parisshyons to the same Cherche." There are also other references, previous to the Charters, to the Mayor of the town.

It would be naturally expected that as there was at an early date a defined governing body in our Saxon borough, there would also be a Moot, Mote, or Town Hall, where the local Witan would sit for the transaction



Front View of the OLD TOWN HALL, Sudbury.

of town business. There was such a hall, which stood at the lower part of the Market Hill, most likely on the site of a much older structure, judging from some of the timber, bricks, &c. It was a picturesque object with its bell cupola, steep tiled roof, gables, carved corner posts, and projecting eaves and storeys, and harmonized well

with its surroundings. The hill with its oval of posts in the centre, and stands for the oil lamps, which just made darkness visible, was girt with a broken, curved line of quaint old timber, brick and wattled buildings, dating from the 15th century downwards; mediæval hostels, wool-halls, shops, and merchants' residences, with wide arched passages and barn-like doors, the spandrels carved with S. George and the Dragon, the "Bull" of the De Clares, the lords of the town, the "Boar" of the De Veres, or the Talbot of Simon of Sudbury, with clustered chimnies, gables with scalloped, enriched verge boards, and moulded rafters and beams, ornamented with carved, floriated, or heraldic bosses.

The upper room of the Moot Hall was used as the council chamber, parish room, sessions court, and theatre of the town. The walls were panelled half-way up with wainscot, black with age. There was a dais at one end, carpeted with green cloth, and on which stood a massive table with turned legs, covered with the same; and "stooles" round the room, each having a plate engraved with the name of the customary occupant. Over the dais was an old, partly washed out, Royal Coat of Arms, said to be of the time of the third Edward, who brought prosperity to the town by settling the foreign Flemings here to teach the natives the "mysterie" of cloth weaving, and the "crafts" of the woollen manufacturers. Outside, on the gable facing the Church, was a locally noted painting of the King's Arms, the handiwork of the eccentric "Scheming Jack" Gainsborough, the brother of the celebrated landscape and portrait painter, Thomas, who used to say that this painting was the only thing his clever, versatile, and eccentric brother ever finished. The rooms on the ground floor were used as cells for prisoners detained for the sessions, for the sleepy watchmen (often supplied with strong ale previous to their nocturnal rounds), and wheezy constables, and for storage purposes. On the north side, next the street, were the shambles and butchers' stalls, where the blue vested and aproned masters and

'prentices saluted the passers by with cries of "Buy! buy! buy!" The "Bushel," where stood the weighing machine and steelyard, adjoined the hall on the south, and close by stood the stocks, whipping post, and pillory, and not far off, ready at a moment's notice, was the ducking stool. On the same side, adjoining the hall, was the house occupied for many years by Mr. W. Ray, a silversmith, and the united buildings presented two conspicuous gables to the view at either end.

There are numerous "Minutes" in the Corporation Books of "Orders and Decrees" respecting this Hall, from about 1550 to 1830. In 1577 we read that there was "payd to Peter, Carpenter, for 30 ft. of borde for the frame of the Hall, and his daye's work, iis. iid." "Item payd to a Tyler for mending the hall (roof) in divers places iis." Item payd to Stonard for ii Dogges of Iron xs. iiid." About the same time a rate of £10 was made for repairs to the "Halle, Jayle, & Bridewell." A new Ducking or "Dipping Stoole" was ordered about 1622 for the too loquacious ladies of the town, costing 12s. 10d. In 1607 the hall was thoroughly repaired and "beautified." On 6th September, 1688, a green carpet and 32 green cushions were ordered to be purchased for the Mayor and Corporation, "eache member to pay 3s. towards the expense of the same." In December 1750, the front of the building being in the course of repair, the Council adjourned to the Crown (now "Rose and Crown"), for business. In 1756 a new chimney was built, and stove provided, and "the Kings Armes repaired."

In the British Museum, there is a record of a trial for heresy, on 25th September, 1556, at the hall, of one Alexander Straghan, before the Bishop. (Harleian ms., i., 247.)

In the time of Elizabeth and James I., "playes & enterludes" were performed gratis by the "Queen's players" for the inhabitants, but so much damage was done to the building, presumably by the excited "gods in the gallery," that an Order was made in 1604, "y^t y^e

Maioꝛ & his Successoꝛs permytting anie playes to be acted in the hall" should forfeit £5. The following Order, telling its own tale, was issued by the Mayor and Corporation on the 16th October, 1607, in the reign of James I. :—

"Whereas the Hall comonlye called the Moot-hall, of this towne of Sudburye, hath byn broughte in muche ruyn and decaye by meanes of diuers disordered and unrulie persons resortinge thither to playes of enterludes & other playes heretofore usually suffred to be acted within the same Hall, And forasmuch as the saide Hall by the consent of the Maioꝛ, Aldermen, & Burgesses of the saide towne have byn more latelie repaired & bewtified by the nowe Maier, as well at the greate charges of the Corporation of this towne as also at the proper charges of the saide Maioꝛ, as upon his accompte nowe shewed forth unto us, it doth & maye appear, ffor the avoydinge of which inconvenience & to the ende that no more playes may be hereafter acted within the same Hall: It is ordered, consented & decreed by the full consent, and agreement of the Maioꝛ, Adermen & Burgesses of this towne. That if any person or persons whatever, shall succede in the place or office of the Maioꝛ of this towne, or his or their deputy or deputies, shall at any tyme hereafter give Licence unto or willinglie permit & suffer, any playes of enterludes or other playes to be acted or kepte within the same hall, the same person or persons therein so offending shall forfeit & pay to & for the use of the Corporation of the saide towne, the sume of five pounds of good & lawfull money of England for any tyme in that behalffe offendinge. To be leveyd of the goodes & chattells of such offender by way of distress."

Driven from official patronage the Players took refuge in a neighbouring barn, and afterwards appeared at the regular theatre. They and their successors, however, had to "arm their obdured breast with stubborn patience as with triple steel," for it was not till 1820 that a theatre was built in Friars' Street, near the Angel Inn. But the decline and fall of the drama in Sudbury was rapid; soon the house presented but a "beggarly account of empty boxes," and in 1849 the building was pulled down, and is now "gone to the tomb of all the Capulets."

Notwithstanding the above stringent prohibitory order, it is evident that plays were acted, with "revels," &c., somewhere in the borough at the town expense, for in the Mayor's Accounts for 1622, there is this item :—" Given to

the Queen's players, the Lady Elizabeth her players, and the Children of the revells xxvijs." Two years before there is a similar entry:—"To the Princes and the Ladie Elizabeth servants, and to the Children of the Revells, to every one of them six shillings in all, xvijjs."

In October, 1675, the butcher's stall, on the ground floor of the Hall, was leased to Thomas Jarvis, jun., for seven years, at the same rent his father paid. (Mr. Jarvis, sen., was the donor of one of the Sudbury Charities, 1631.)

In 1723 a lease was granted for 50 years of the small house next the Moot Hall, afterwards "The Bushell." In 1826, 14th April, it was decided by the Corporation that this projection should be taken down, with Mr. W. Ray's consent.

In 1747, and again in 1759, there were severe epidemics of small pox in the town, and about the former year 64 persons who died from the disease were buried in All Saints Churchyard, within the space of 13 months. On 5th February, 1739, the Corporation adjourned from the Moot Hall to the old Priory, the residence of the Mayor, Mr. Dansie Carter, he being also Deputy Steward, who was "afraid to attend at the Hall on account of the small pox."

In 1771 there were disgraceful riots in the town, and the Corporation were imprisoned in their own Hall for ten hours. These riots originated in an attempt to procure the admission of certain persons to the freedom of the Borough. The following vigorous protest from the Mayor, &c., stating the facts of the case, is extracted from the Minute Books of the Corporation. These outbreaks were not apparently of unfrequent occurrence in bye-gone days, particularly about this time.

"Whereas at a Court of Orders and Decrees held in and for the said Borough (of Sudbury), at the Moot Hall then by the Mayor, Aldermen, and Capital Burgesses of the said Borough, on the twenty-ninth day of October last; a wicked, seditious, and turbulent multitude of advised men, under the false pretence of asserting their Title to the freedom of the Corporation, but with a real illegal design (as their actions have abundantly verified) to disturb the Peace of the Community, and the good Government of this Borough;

did by their outrageous clamour and noise, so effectually interrupt, break in upon, and obstruct the business of the said Court as to necessitate the Mayor to dissolve the same; whereas after the dissolution of the said Court, when the Mayor, Aldermen, and Capital Burgesses were peaceably endeavouring to return to their several habitations, the same ill-misled, and riotous men, tumultuously interposed, and with violence, prevented their return, and with illegal force imprisoned the Members of the Corporate Body, in the Town Hall of the said Borough, from between eleven and twelve of the clock of the forenoon of that day, till after nine at night, totally denying the access of their friends and depriving them of all sustenance and refreshment, and at the close of the day that they might the more secretly and securely perpetrate their intended mischievous purposes after putting out the lights of the room, they again repeated for a long time together their inhuman outrages and threats with horrid imprecations in the dark, accompanied by a still greater severity of injurious treatment by insult and abuse, and by throwing at the Members of the Corporation with their utmost violence, stones, pieces of timber, the buckets that hung in the Hall, and all such other mischievous implements as they could readily procure, to the infinite terror and dismay, and to the great hurt and damage of the Magistrates, and other Members of this Corporation; so that in the end we whose names are underwritten; by force of the severity of the treatment we received, and for the necessary preservation of our respective lives, were compelled to consent by our voice to several illegal acts, unwarrantably extorted from us.

Now therefore that such our constrained assent may not by our total silence be imputed to us, we do jointly and severally, solemnly protest, and sincerely declare; that nothing but the terror impelled upon us, and the imminent danger of our respective lives, from the outrages and unjust treatment we had previously received, and were still threatened with, prevailed over our better resolutions. And we do firmly and totally disavow, and deny that the assent of our minds was ever given to the illegal power that was exercised over us, or to the acts that were extorted from us, by the unjust impulse and forcible restraint upon our legal liberty and the freedom of our assent."

"January 3rd, 1772.

(Signed) JOHN OLIVER, MAYOR.

W. HUMPHRY,	}	ALDERMEN,
PETER DELANDE,		
DANSIE CARTER,		

and other Members of the Corporation."

At one of the Quarter Sessions for the Borough, in 1791, in a case of assault, the Common Jury not agreeing in their verdict were locked up, but about midnight they broke open the door of the strong room in the Hall, in which they were locked, and made off, every man to his own house. Next morning they re-assembled, but being then no longer legally considered the same Jury, they were dismissed by the Recorder and Court, who determined to apply to the Attorney-General for advice in a case so unprecedented.

In close connection with the old Hall and the Corporation, are the sumptuary regulations made at various times with respect to the gowns and robes of the members, their facings and trimmings, materials and cost. The scarlet and black municipal vestments and official gay trappings, marking the civic state and dignity of the wearers (who, by the way, held a life office), had, however, to be paid for in whole or in part by those who donned them. Apparently the appeal *ad pecuniam* was not very satisfactory and efficacious, for the Corporation "Orders and Decrees" give repetitions of the injunctions in various terms at intervals of several years. Counsel's opinion was subsequently taken as to the validity of these Orders, but this opinion does not appear on the Minute Books. As early as the commencement of the 16th century there are Orders in the Town Books for Mayors and Ex-Mayors to have scarlet gowns with velvet tippets, or to forfeit xxd. each. The Burgesses were to have "murrey" gowns, or to forfeit xd. These gowns were to be provided at the wearers' own costs. On 26th May, 1720, an "Order" runs—"That for the future every person belonging to this Corporation shall be decently habitted with gowns as usuall and appear in Court with them as usuall upon the Mayor's summons, and for default of any one of the same appearing habitted as aforesaid, we do hereby order him to pay for every neglect of the same to the Mayor the sum of 5s."

On 4th September, 1721, the Court ordered a scarlet

gown for the Mayor, the Aldermen to have the approbation of the cloth. The Aldermen at their own costs were to have decent black gowns with different robing and facing from those of the Chief Burgesses:—namely, scarlet velvet or fur. The Chief Burgesses at their own costs were to find decent black gowns, robed with black velvet, all of one fashion, and of the same sort of stuff. The Aldermen were to forfeit for the non-providing of the gowns 10 guineas, and the Burgesses 5 guineas.

On 17th May, 1726, 24 black gowns were ordered to be purchased and paid for by the Court, to be kept in a wardrobe in the Hall. They were to be of black “say,” robed with black velvet. Each member of the Corporation on being sworn was to pay a guinea towards his gown, the other guinea being paid out of the common chest. At the same Court it was ordered that a copper plate should be placed on each Corporation seat in the Hall, with the name of the occupant engraved thereon.

As the result of a successful law-suit against the Corporation, under an execution, on 18th September, 1813, their goods and chattels were sold by public auction on the Market Hill. These included an “elegant Scarlet Robe, faced with black velvet,” which was bought by a well-known jovial, Radical, Dissenting, fox-hunting miller, who several times rode to hounds, having over his “pink” the scarlet Mayor’s gown; which fluttered in the wind as the sarcastic Nimrod followed the pack, amid the laughter and ironical cheers of the delighted spectators.

At the same auction were sold 260 fire buckets, which had hung in the Moot Hall, it being a custom from time immemorial that every person on taking up his freedom should present a bucket to the Hall.

About 1826 a wave of Municipal improvement swept over the town, and it was decided by the “City Fathers” to open out the Market Hill by removing the old Moot Hall and Mr. Ray’s house adjoining, and also all the houses round the west end of S. Peter’s Church. The Corporation proposed to the Paying and Lighting

Commissioners to sell them the Hall for town improvements for £300, and on the 10th September in the above-named year, the Hall was conveyed to the Commissioners, the £300 purchase-money being advanced by Mr. Branwhite Oliver, at five per cent. interest. At the beginning of 1832 it was "ordered that the Bell of the old Town Hall be given for the purpose of increasing the fund of the subscriptions entered into for the reparation of the Church Clock of St. Peter for the purchase of a new Bell for the Clock." This bell still hangs in the cupola of the spire, but is unused, the clock striking the hours on the tenor bell.

On 5th December, 1841, it was ordered that the Hall be pulled down, and the site laid into the public road. The old materials realised the following prices:—Old tiles, £8 12s.; old lead, 11s. 6d.; materials sold by auction, £64 18s.; total, £74 1s. 6d.

The Corporation met for the first time in the new Town Hall on 2nd January, 1836, the old building having been let for £7 10s., for a warehouse, &c.

The "vigilant cock" which formed the vane, with part of the hammered ornamental iron scroll-work below, now points the direction of the wind on the apex of the gable of a granary in the rear of the "Maldon Grey" public-house, which is picturesquely situated on the Ipswich Road, near the "Cherry ground" and old pits, now planted with trees, and bounded by steep chalky cliffs, bright with coltsfoot and golden furze, where the Sudbury people, fond of Nature's charms, love to resort. In the yard of the same village hostel stood for a long time one of the stone coffins dug up when the Vandals of the period demolished the Priory of the Black Friars at Sudbury, about 140 years ago. The stone receptacle, which had for centuries religiously guarded the dust of the honoured dead, buried in the odour of sanctity in a specially sacred spot, was converted into a sink to receive the slops from a beer-house pump! Could indignity and degradation further go? The coffin has disappeared for aye, but the vane

which whirls aloft still shows "which way the wind is," and is the sole remnant of the old Civic Hall of the borough.

The view which heads this paper, of the Hall from the north-west, the Market Hill, and the tower of S. Peter's, is from an original water-colour painting, by the late Mr. Goldsmith, of Bath, formerly of Sudbury, a near relative of the Burkitt family, which has never been published, and is in the possession of the writer.

The second view is copied from a water-colour, also by the same artist, and represents the Hall from the opposite side, with the "King's Arms" in the gable, and also part of Friars' Street and Sepulchre Street. The Hall and Mr. Ray's house alone are given. The painting was lent for illustrating this paper by the owner, Mr. G. L. Andrewes, Sudbury.