

# THE BISHOP'S CASTLE, POLITICS AND THE TOWN HALL THROUGH THE CENTURIES

## WHY BISHOP'S CASTLE?

- ***Before the Norman Conquest***, there was no town here, though there may have been a very small settlement to the south of the existing town, around a predecessor of the present church. However. Between 1085 and 1100, a castle was built here by the Bishops of Hereford, as Marcher Lords, for defence against their fellow powerful lords and the Welsh.
- ***The function of the castle*** was primarily to defend the rich agricultural land and produce of the Bishops' Lydbury North estate. Later in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, mainly for the purpose of facilitating the marketing of the estate's produce, a town was created to the south of the castle. Since medieval times the settlement has expanded little and maintains its simple grid of streets, which lead down the hill and away from the castle site to form the town. In 1203, King John granted Bishop's Castle its first charter and by the end of the 13th century there were 46 Burgesses. For at least another six centuries this town, a convenient gateway from mid-Wales into England, flourished as a market town and perhaps surprisingly still hosts a weekly livestock market.
- ***During the Reformation*** the break with Rome under Henry VIII diminished the power of the church in the land, the ownership of its estates such as Lydbury North passed into wealthy secular hands.
- ***Under Elizabeth I*** another charter of 1573, allowed self-government by one Bailiff and fifteen chief Burgesses (to include a justice of the peace, clerk of the market and coroner). This self-perpetuating council could appoint a recorder, two sergeants at mace, two chamberlains, two constables and a town clerk; the borough had its own prison from this time. The castle - the seat of the Bishop's power - was no longer relevant and fell into disuse. In fact by the time of the civil war it was in such decay that it was not thought worth 'slighting' - damaging so that it could not be used by the enemy.
- ***Parliamentary representation:*** In 1584 two Bishop's Castle burgesses had presented themselves to parliament and were enrolled, partly due to 'insider information and coaching' and partly due to the pressure on officials of admitting 400 other members that day. The charter, granted by James I in 1617, reinforced and extended the Elizabethan one and from this was evolved the tenuous notion that Bishop's Castle burgesses were empowered to send two representatives to parliament, which it continued to do for more than 200 years despite its population never far exceeding 3000.

## A NEW SEAT OF POWER

- ***By the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century*** the ruined castle, the symbol of the Bishops' power, had all but disappeared - quarried by local people for reuse in their own buildings. However, the powerful owners of local estates and the burgesses they relied upon for votes, required a building worthy of their status in which to conduct the town's civic, judicial and commercial affairs. It was decided in 1745 to commission a new hall to replace the crumbling guildhall, which then probably stood on this site, and at some point between 1750 and 1765 the present Town Hall was built.
- ***The architect for the new town hall in Bishop's Castle*** was almost certainly ***William Baker (1705-1771) 'The C18th Midlands Gentleman Architect'***. He was responsible for several civic structures locally including the Butter Cross at Ludlow and also the Town Hall in Montgomery. Two different sets of unsigned architectural drawings for a Town Hall in Bishop's Castle survive; William Baker probably supervised the work on the existing building. The open arches of this floor would have afforded good views of the growing town, the land beyond and the

work going on in both. The arches were enclosed for use as a market hall at a much later date. The clock and its tower were replaced in the 1860s.

- **The Council Chamber** is where the Bailiff and 15 head burgesses met in earlier times and where the Town Council meets today. The Chamber also served as a courtroom for several centuries, although sometimes the adjourned Quarter Sessions were conducted close by at the Castle Inn.
- **Politics and the landed gentry:** During the mid-eighteenth century the town's potential as a secure and very manageable parliamentary power base, was noticed by *Robert Clive*, fresh from his very lucrative exploits in the Indian subcontinent. In 1763 he bought and moved his family to nearby Walcot Hall. He then purchased all the other estates surrounding the town to ensure he, and later his son, would have first call on the votes of the local burgesses - who were bribed at each election for good measure, whether the Clive candidate was opposed or not.
- **An Honest Burgess:** The Clives did not have unanimous support however, as evidenced by a headstone in the churchyard. Raised by his family it commemorates the Honest Burgess, **Matthew Marston**, who died in 1802, and had consistently refused the bribes.
- **Another headstone** hints at some local opposition to the anti-abolitionist stance of the Clive faction in the passionate national debate about slavery. It **commemorates I.D. 'a Native of Africa who died in this town Sept 9th 1801'**. It has not yet been possible to identify I.D., but it is possible that he was in Bishop's Castle with John Charles Kinchant, who unsuccessfully contested the parliamentary election here the following year.
- **These local tussles**, though they may seem to have gone in favour of the Clive faction created much wider ripples which fed into the great national debate on electoral reform, in which the corrupt Clive 'machine' was eventually beaten. In 1832, Bishop's Castle was included in a list of fifty-seven 'rotten' boroughs deemed unworthy of the right to direct parliamentary representation, of which it was deprived in the **Parliamentary Reform Act of that year**. This turning point in the town's and the country's history is marked by the south window of the market hall. There were riotous elections during the early 19th century with the struggle for reform. The Town Hall would have been used to detain and try the rioters as the venue for the petty sessions' court. The renovation has allowed us a glimpse into the first 100 years of this building's use as the Town gaol. It was less than satisfactory and by the mid 19th century the formation of a county police force led to a purpose built lock-up in the new police station. Magistrates courts were held in the Town Hall up to the 1960s and it continues as a venue for Coroners' courts to the present day.
- **In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century**, the Town Council continues to meet here and processes on occasion from the Town Hall to the Church - as it has done for centuries - and the building retains its function as a commercial market place. And now the renovation has overcome many of the barriers to wider use. It is fully accessible, has internally accessed toilets, under floor heating and has lost its draughts! The project has revealed the building's historical importance and inherent beauty and historical importance and we are happy to share it with everyone interested in this place and the Town.