

Progress Report to the Guildhall Committee Meeting on 18 May, 2017

Re: The Old Magistrates' Court and location of new lift for access to the historic rooms, and the proposed new building to house the muniment room and toilets.

Introduction

Following the condition survey and measured drawings completed by Leys Longden in January 2017, a further internal inspection of the Old Magistrates' Court was conducted on 20 April, 2017 and a meeting with VWHDC Conservation Officer and a representative from English Heritage was held on 5 April, 2017. This report aims to update the Committee on developments, list in more detail work required within the Old Magistrates' Court, and outline the next steps that require approval.

1 Old Magistrates' Court

As part of the investigation work, the door between the Old Magistrates' Court and the hallway at the foot of the staircase to the Bear Room and Council Chamber was opened.

To provide level access through this doorway in future it will be necessary to remove the more recent chipboard floor and timbers.

There are several options for a new floor covering:

- Marmoleum – a linoleum type material made from natural products that does not off-gas and so is used in many museums. It is available in many colours and can be joined so that patterns of different colours can be made.
- Carpet tiles – hardwearing and easy to replace but not appropriate to the age of the building
- Engineered wood floor – more costly initially but should have a long life. However, the thickness of the wood and the clearance under the door would need to be checked

1.1 Electrical and rewiring work

Removal of the timber floor also revealed some cables which will need to be re-routed when the floor is replaced.

In addition some new electrical sockets will be required, as well as provision for exhibition lighting and a new security system to adapt the Courtroom for use as an exhibition space with adjacent store. New wiring may be required for computers and phones (cat 5 or 6) although Wi-Fi may be possible for some applications.

1.2 Lighting

The existing lighting system in the Courtroom is only suitable for general illumination, and should be replaced. For exhibition purposes, dimmable, display lights are needed. It is suggested that a new low voltage track is suspended from the ceiling. This would be similar to the installation in the County Hall Museum. It will probably be necessary to also purchase some local lighting that can be mounted on the top of display panels. Suitable power sockets would be needed for these lights. As it is envisaged that it will not be possible to place floor boxes with sockets in the solid floor, some high level sockets at the same level as the top of the exhibition walls may be required.

It is proposed that a work station should be located in the old public gallery. General and task lighting will be required in this area.

Light fittings in the old Robing Room and cells, that will be used for storage, would benefit from being LED low power units rather than the existing older type units.

1.3 Windows and ventilation

Most of the existing windows in the Old Magistrates' Court have secondary glazing, and the large south facing windows also have venetian blinds. Replacement of this secondary glazing with double glazing units that provide more security, UV protection and new blinds would improve the appearance of the Courtroom and Robing Room.

I plan to consult the Arts Council England Security Advisor to ensure that the Courtroom and Council Chamber would be appropriate for loans requiring Government Indemnity. He may suggest additional security measures for the windows and doors.

In the cells area there is one single glazed window and a ventilation grille that will need attention.

1.4 Doors and security/fire alarms

Suitable locks and control of the keys that open them are very important to security. However, we are also aware that suitable fire exits must be available.

1.5 Display Walls

If an art exhibition is to be staged in the Courtroom, movable temporary display walls will be required. Mila-Wall by MBA or equivalent – is a system of lightweight honeycomb exhibition walls that can be configured in different layouts to suit exhibitions. They can be lifted by two people and have an inbuilt locking mechanism so that walls can be joined at different angles. The number and size of units needs to be assessed for use in this space. The walls are freestanding and do not need attaching to the fabric of the building.

It is anticipated that the panelling of the Courtroom and the Magistrates' Bench will be left in situ so that the previous use of the room as a Court is still visible. However, repairs will be needed to some areas and if the panelling is to be painted as part of the redecoration, advice may be needed from the Conservation Officer.

It is assumed that rehangng the William IV Coat of Arms behind the bench and perhaps hanging other paintings on the walls will be agreeable to the Conservation Officer. It may be advisable to install a picture hanging system so that paintings can be moved without repeated damage to the walls.

1.6 Showcases

Many exhibitions have some items that are more appropriately displayed behind glass rather than hung on walls. Hence it is anticipated that some showcases will be required in the Courtroom.

To maintain maximum flexibility in the Courtroom for different uses, such as filming, citizenship role play in a courtroom setting, as well as exhibition use, it would not be advisable to install numerous large showcases fastened to the wall. Smaller 'deskcases' or floor-standing glass cases are easier to move when required.

There are some cases currently in the County Hall Museum Attic Gallery that may be better located in the Courtroom or Council Chamber in the future. However, some new cases will also be required.

1.7 Cell Walls

The space under the Mayor's Parlour was converted into three cells for prisoners, probably during the 20th century. The survey has shown that these walls are not load bearing and therefore could be removed to make a larger, more useful, store area. It is suggested that permission is sought to remove the wall between cell 1 and cell 2 to create a larger area for static racking. New metal racking will be required to make maximum use of the space available. Roller racking is not suitable for this area as the rooms have very low ceilings.

The smallest cell No. 3 would be kept intact as a quarantine store. There is currently a sliding door which closes cells 1 and 2 and the lobby area off from the corridor. It appears substantial but will need a new lock.

1.8 Old Pantry and WC

The old Ladies and Gent toilets used by prisoners require improvement. It is suggested that one should be refurbished as a unisex toilet and the other furnished with a sink and worktop so that it can be used either as a tea station for staff or to provide water when required for conservation/cleaning. These works would make the Old Magistrates' Court area self-sufficient if it was needed to use it outside the normal opening hours of the Guildhall.

1.9 Plant Room – under public gallery

As access is required to the gas valve in this room, it cannot be a secure storage area. This space will be used to store display materials/ panels, packaging, tools and equipment.

1.10 Public Gallery

The old public gallery has been used as an office area by the previous tenants. The screens they placed around the desks will be removed but desks retained in this area, so that a member of museum staff or volunteer will have a clear view of the exhibition area below, enabling them to work whilst invigilating the space. Constant invigilation is a requirement for loans with Government Indemnity.

1.11 Robing Room (Music Room)

This room has been identified as a storage space for textiles, and delicate items. It is suggested that the entrances to the WCs under the external stairs are sealed up to prevent damp or pests entering the room. The old fireplace also needs to be sealed. The room has painted panelling around the walls so no shelving can be attached directly to the walls. Hence free standing shelving will be used. Some refurbishment and redecoration will be required including new light fittings.

1.12 Heating

At present, one plant room operates all the heating in the historic rooms and the Abbey Hall. Until the future use of the Abbey Hall is confirmed it is uncertain how the heating system will need to be controlled. For museum stores the ideal is steady RH (humidity) and relatively low temperature. Frost protection is required but this is a very low level of the heating. However, the exhibition area and office need to be heated so that staff and visitors in these

areas are at an appropriate temperature. However there still needs to be steady temperature and humidity levels for the objects on display. Whilst the tenants are in the Old Magistrates' Court, temperature and humidity have been monitored but there have been sudden increases in temperature when heating is switched on.

It would be helpful to have an M & E specialist advise the Guildhall Committee on options for heating controls that can be used with the existing heating system e.g. using a humidistat instead of a thermostat in the stores areas.

Dehumidifiers may be required in the stores, and if needed it would be advantageous to provide suitable drainage. To prevent mould formation, suitable air movement needs to be provided. This may require either a fan or an air conditioning unit.

- Request advice from M & E consultant regarding controls of the heating system.

1.13 General works

There will be a need for some cleaning and redecoration throughout the Old Magistrates' Court and for some exterior doors to be sealed to prevent pests entering the area.

In future, signage will be needed to advertise new displays, opening hours, tours around Guildhall etc. and a name agreed for the new exhibition space e.g. 'The Old Courtroom' The signage throughout the historic rooms and towards the new toilets etc should be co-ordinated.

2 Lift and staircase

The English Heritage Officer and the Vale of the White Horse DC Conservation Officer who attended the meeting with the Town Clerk, Surveyor and Museum Consultant on 5 April. The English Heritage Officer and the Conservation Officer stated that in their opinion that we would not be allowed to alter the 1731 staircase to the Bear Room and Council Chamber so that a lift for disabled access could be accommodated with a new narrower staircase. They did not think that the current low balustrade was a risk, provided that staff were trained to assist visitors. Although we pointed out that this would not always be possible they were determined that the staircase should remain in its present form

They understood that accessibility was a prime concern of the Town Council and offered an alternative proposal the involved using three lifts to access the Council Chamber. This proposal would also have destroyed part of the panelling of the Council Chamber, and that was felt by the Town Council Officers and consultants to be inappropriate. A third proposal was then considered. This involves:

1. Platform lift 1 within the Bridge Street Foyer area to rise 600mm to the floor level at the bottom of the 1731 staircase such that the Old Courtroom can be accessed. This would also provide access to Lift 2.
2. Lift 2 rising from the old WC off the Bridge Street foyer, at the level of the current hall at the bottom of the 1731 staircase, and then rising through the building to the level of the Abbey Room. This would also stop at the Bear Room level and the Mayor's Parlour.
3. Lift 3 to the west end of the Council Chamber in a new extension.

This solution is not as elegant as the previous suggestion where one lift could access the Bear Room, Council Chamber and Abbey Room. Lift 2 would totally block the existing

corridor between the Bear Room and the Mayor's Parlour and the link to the Abbey Hall, but it would allow access to both these rooms.

Lift 3 would be physically remote from the Foyer so it would be necessary to include an accessible WC and a fire staircase within the extension needed for this lift. This would require demolition of the external staircase and replacement by a stone building that is aesthetically in keeping with the external style of the Council Chamber.

Until the future use of the Abbey Hall is clear, it seems inappropriate to sever the connection between the historic Guildhall rooms and the modern areas by the installation of Lift 2. Hence if the proposals of the Conservation Officer were to be adopted then this part of the project should perhaps be delayed until more information is available.

The Committee will need now to consider whether to continue with the previously agreed plans for the lift and staircase or whether to explore the proposals put forward by the Conservation Officer.

3 Muniment Room and toilets

Plans for the proposed Muniment Room and Toilets have been submitted to the VWHDC Conservation Officer together with a historic evaluation of the Roysse Room and Roysse Court Offices. It is hoped that permission will be granted for this modern extension. It may be necessary to have an archaeology watching brief when the foundations are excavated as the position of the building will be along the route of the Abbey Wall and possibly where there were kitchens of St John's Hospital or stables.

Jane Bowen
13th May 2017.