

# Blandford Forum

Friday afternoon, 15 July

Pevsner waxes lyrical about Blandford Forum: 'One of the most satisfying Georgian ensembles anywhere in England'. Most of the town centre was destroyed in the great fire of 1731. William and John Bastard, experienced architects and builders, were charged with rebuilding the town. This rebuilding, completed in about 30 years, resulted in the town more or less as we now see it.

The Bastard brothers created a fine new Georgian parish church on the footprint of the old one. Their design intended a spire on the tower but to save money it was replaced by a wooden cupola. The original east end had only an apse. In 1896 the apse was moved 30 feet on rollers, to create a chancel. The impressive interior has giant ionic columns and the aisles are no longer encumbered by the Victorian galleries which were removed in the 1970s. The organ is housed in the west gallery which has an elegant curved front supported on ionic columns. The box pews have been retained and there is a pulpit from Wren's St Antholin in London. We spent some time looking at a dugout chest with a cavity which seemed intended to hold a particular object - perhaps a reliquary. Two panels showing the names of benefactors have the word Blandford blanked out so that 20th century invading Germans would not know where they were.

The Town Hall, in Portland stone, designed in 1734 by the Bastards, sits centrally on the north side of the market place in a range of three storey buildings now disturbed by

the too-low 20th century HSBC bank. At ground level its three arches form a covered area (the shambles) for the market. Above there are three pedimented windows. The hall on the upper floor has a dais with a central canopied chair and benches. Access is by a poky modern staircase, the original having been removed when a new council chamber was built.

A blue plaque tells us that Lime Tree House was built by the Bastard brothers in 1760 for their five sisters. It is an attractive five-bay brick house which further demonstrates the skills of the architects. It now houses the Fashion Museum. Inside there is an interesting kitchen cupboard shaped to fit the wall structure.

Coupar House, the grandest post-fire house, is now occupied by the British Legion. It has a five-bay front with a pedimented centre bay in what might be called country baroque. Inside there is an appropriately grand staircase with a rococo ceiling. The two ground floor rooms have kept their original features. The billiard room is said to be haunted.

John Bastard's house, on the south side of the market place, is the left hand side of a five-bay front, built as houses with shops at street level. The design has a central bay with a carriage entrance flanked by giant pilasters and topped with a broken pediment. The adjacent Red Lion Inn is a version of the same design. The house is now occupied by the Age UK charity shop. The first floor room at the back has ornate joinery and plasterwork and was probably intended to show off the Bastards' versatility.

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