

The Guildhall and Holy Sepulchre Church, Northampton

14 July

The Guildhall by E W Godwin (1860) demonstrated the civic pride of Northampton with its strong workforce, good central location and communications. Pride was expressed in the depiction of local trades and occupations in the capitals of the many columns, crisply carved in good local oolitic limestone. The main hall had its supporting girders exposed, decorated with metal flowers and leaves then cheerfully painted, almost in celebration,

reminding us that Godwin was a contemporary of Brunel. Throughout the interior there were good original brass lights and door furniture, all highly polished and possibly worthy of further investigation.

Godwin's furniture, while preserved in the council chamber, had a feeling of being obsolete. The oak table was massive and firmly determined to stay where Godwin intended. The chairs, 71cm high and also of oak, were of a curved horseshoe design to hold the small of the sitter's back and arms. The back leg was a single splat terminating in a chamfered oak horizontal rail with a castor under each end. These castors allowed the sitter to silently leave a meeting by lifting the front of the chair. Godwin originated from Bristol where his father was a leather cutter and these chairs could have been made by a boatbuilder there, with their heavy curved construction. Green & King, a firm of cabinet makers in Baker Street, London, are believed to

Godwin's brass door fittings in Northampton Guildhall



An example of the oak horseshoe-form chairs designed by E. W. Godwin for Northampton Guildhall



have been the makers and they were no doubt relieved to have the inlaid contrast detail to the turnings and back leg splat to show their skill.

Holy Sepulchre Church, a short walk away across the busy market square, was built in the 12th century as thanks for the safe return from the Crusades and as a replica of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem. Its round tower, with a clearly visible splay, had to be reduced to half its height to prevent its collapse, but the massive columns placed in a circle create an internal feeling of peace despite the survival of the church being largely due to support from the military.

There are many early remains to see here if one looks: possibly 13th century fragments of tombstones are to be found at the bases of the great pillars, and the original simple font is now on a window sill. Our attention was also directed to the domed chest - one of less than 150

surviving examples, possibly from the 1400s. The chest was securely locked, and with a decaying lid, but of interest. I was struck by the resemblance of the round tower with its sturdy columns to the Godwin chairs, both to be seen in a town known for purposeful enterprise. It was a pleasure to see both venues actively in use: the glitz of the Guildhall architecture matched by the guests at hourly Saturday weddings, and the active preservation of Holy Sepulchre Church.

Holy Sepulchre Church has a website: www.stseps.org, and E.W. Godwin's notebooks and sketchbooks for the Guildhall are on the V&A website. Both deserve further study.

Carole Copperwheat

Members who were on the Dorset conference last year may be interested to note that the September issue of *World of Interiors* features the school that fascinated us on the final visit of the weekend.

Jeremy Bate

The decorated girders and wall painting in the main hall of Northampton Guildhall

The detail of the back leg of Godwin chair

