

The Muniments Room No 7 in Parish News April 2013 by John Read

Above the south porch of the church is a room generally known as the Muniments Room, because for many years it was used by the Saffron Walden Town Council to store their records or “muniments”. Access to this room is through a wooden door between the porch and the bookstall, leading to a steep and narrow spiral staircase, but the room itself is light and airy with three large windows looking out over the churchyard, and a fourth facing into the nave of the church. It contains several large wooden chests and following its recent vacation by the Town Council, is now used as a store room by the choir.

But how did this room inside the parish church come to be used by the Town Council? The answer lies in the fact that the room was originally associated with the Guild of the Holy Trinity. The events which led up to the establishment of the Guild are described in Appendix 7 to the church guide by Kenneth Dixon and Hamish Walker which can be seen on the church website, but the important thing is that when the Guild was first established under a charter of 1514 granted by Henry VIII, it was effectively the administrative body for the town. As it was also a religious Guild, there was nothing strange in the Guild having its meeting place in a room in the church.

By 1549, the charter granted to the Guild had been superseded by a new charter granted to the Town, but the Town Corporation continued to use the room for its meetings, possibly until the Town Hall was built in 1761. Until 1835, when for the first time nonconformists became eligible to serve on the Town Council, church officials and Town Councillors were quite likely to have been the same people, and few would have questioned the use of the room for civic purposes. Whilst the change in eligibility rules is likely to have loosened the link between church and town, the room is said to have been used for the annual election of the mayor until the early twentieth century. The church guide records that even in the last few years, the door leading to the room was left open after the annual mayor-making ceremony, for formal inspection by the Council.

Although in more recent years, the room has no longer been used for meetings of the Council, it continued to be used by the Council for the storage of its historic muniments, some many centuries old, but now that most of these have been deposited with the Essex Record Office in Chelmsford, the right to use the room has been relinquished by the Town Council.

In writing this article, I have made use of the abovementioned church guide, as well as books on the history of Saffron Walden by C B Rowntree (1951) and Malcolm White (1991).

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