

OLIVER ARCHITECTURE

with James Edgar Historic Buildings Consultants

ST. MARY'S HALL, COVENTRY SIGNIFICANCE OF THE MEDIEVAL KITCHEN August 2019

In 1859, John Henry Parker, a renowned antiquarian, described St Mary's Hall as follows:

This is probably the most perfect house [he was referring to Guildhalls or Town Halls] of the period that we have remaining in England, and may be said to be quite complete, though somewhat spoiled first by neglect, and then by modern improvement.

Apart from the fact that there have been many more modern 'improvements', this assessment holds true today.

The kitchen at St Mary's Hall is an extraordinary rare survival of a medieval kitchen and a most important part of the complex of buildings that have always epitomized the status of the City of Coventry as one of England's foremost historic towns. Without the kitchen there would have not been a great hall because the whole purpose was to entertain important townspeople and visitors at lavish feasts and banquets. This remains the purpose and use today as Coventry aspires to entice more visitors to enjoy this remarkable heritage. The restoration of the kitchen is an important part of this aspiration and represents an important step in the journey towards re-establishing the City's status as a European City of Culture.

Constructed between 1394-1420, the kitchen was probably paid for by members of the Botoner family, wealthy Coventry merchants who were major patrons at the Cathedral and the Charterhouse. The structure has remained in use as a kitchen for more than 600 years. Regrettably, alterations to retain it in use for food preparation, with toilets above, have resulted in the concealment of many very important historic features including the medieval windows and four fireplaces, sculpture and carving and the heavy-beamed roof. The whole sense of space – a larger and lofty open room, designed to allow heat and cooking smells to be dispersed and for kitchen staff to attend to the massive roasting spits and boiling ovens – remains to be revealed.

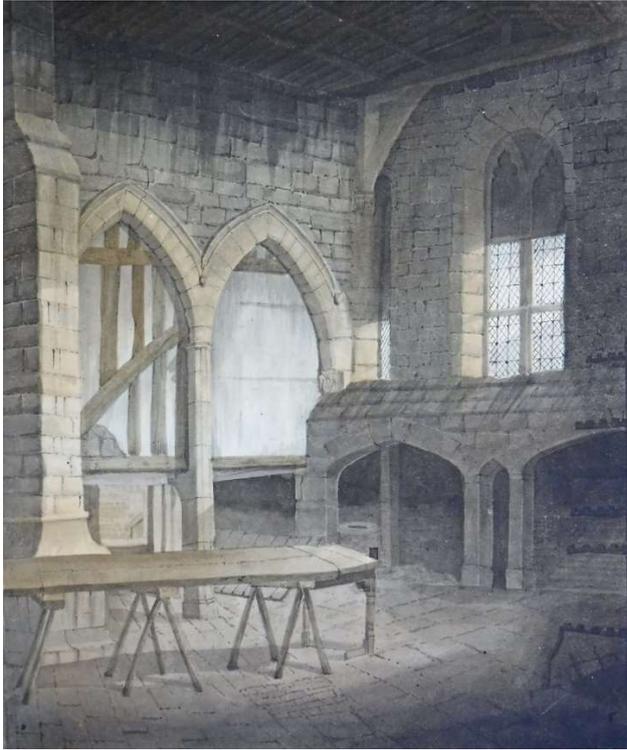
Unlike the kitchens at the guildhalls in London and York, Coventry's has survived damaging later changes to the structure and bombing. Historic drawings and photographs, and a glimpse through a hatch, prove that much has survived and could be recovered by the removal of the modern 'improvements' - kitchen apparatus and finishes and the inserted floor and ceiling. It will mean the end of primary cooking but people will be able to eat, drink, wander and wonder in the reinstated space.

There are medieval kitchens at Glastonbury and Durham (now part of a visitor attraction), in a few Oxbridge colleges and at other sites such as Carlisle Castle, Haddon Hall and South Wingfield, both in Derbyshire, and Stanton Harcourt, Oxfordshire. The closest example is at Kenilworth Castle. But many of these are ruinous, not accessible to the public or cannot be enjoyed in association with the great hall. The recreated kitchen is one of the main attractions at Hampton Court Palace, but it is more than 100 years younger than St Mary's.

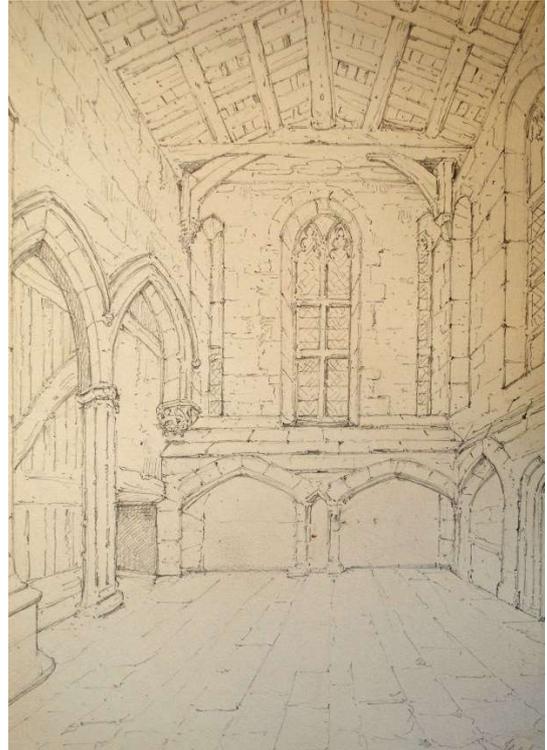
The kitchen at St Mary's Hall, Coventry is therefore a vital part of 'the most perfect house' and it should be restored.

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View looking towards north-east corner, c.1792-1800



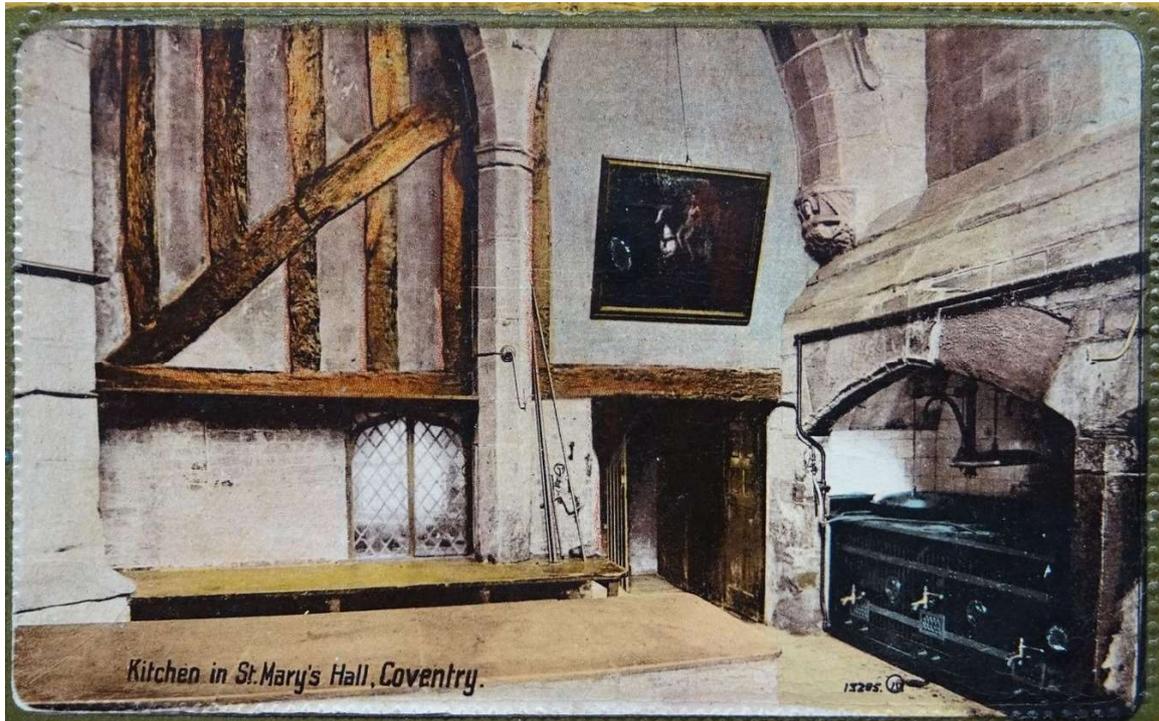
View looking east, c.1860



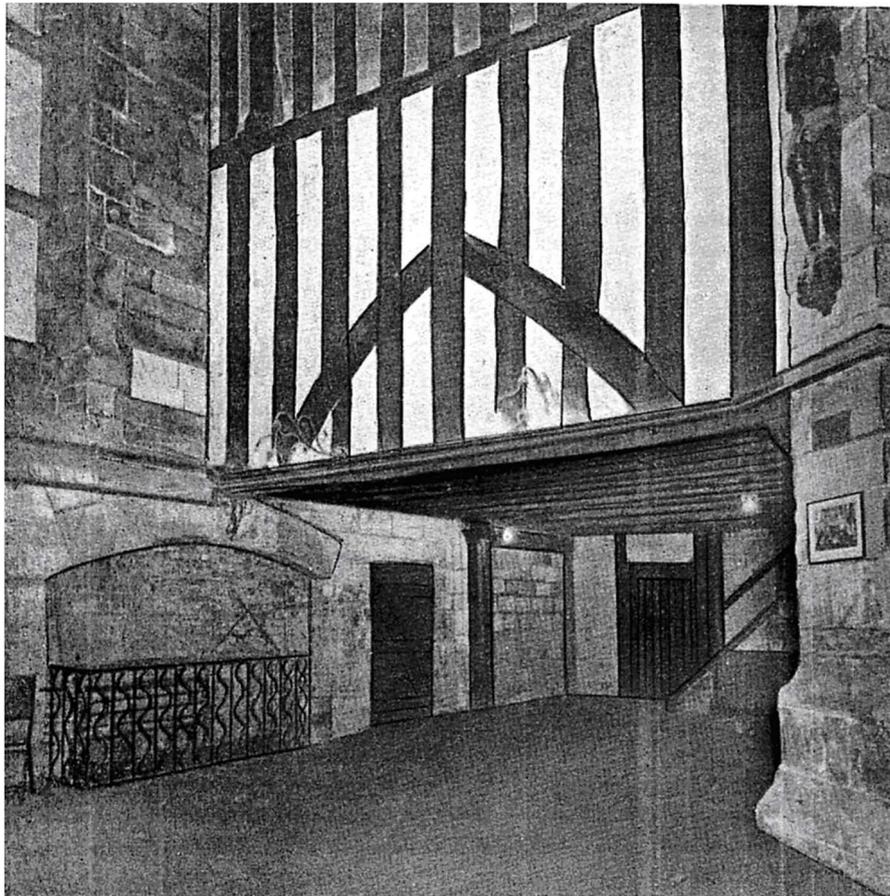
Feeding distressed weavers, 1861

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North-east corner, c 1925



1948, just before alteration