

to assess their suitability. It was noted that the fact that Paul Rutledge lives in New Buckenham was a great help in obtaining the agreement of house owners to opening their property to the Group's project team.

The evening concluded with a lively discussion about the project and, in thanking the three speakers, Leigh Alston said he would like to see the SHBG undertaking a similar project in Suffolk.

Pam Walker

SUFFOLK GILDHALLS

A talk by Leigh Alston at Haughley Barn on 16th November 2005

As a subject close to my heart (being responsible for Lavenham, one of the county's finest) I was delighted to write the report on this well attended lecture, the result of Leigh's research into the subject of medieval gilds and the fine halls they erected.

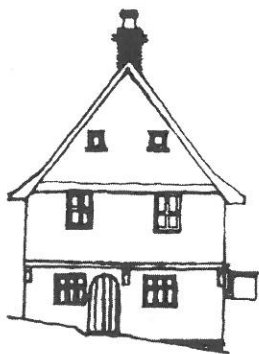
Leigh began by explaining the difference between craft and merchant gilds (using the original spelling, from geld, or payment), that were responsible for organising trade and commerce, and those which were the subject of his lecture, the social and religious gilds. Around 550 gilds are known to have existed in 14th and 15th century Suffolk, the vast majority being religious fraternities.

The purpose of gilds was admirably illustrated by the Wenhaston 'Doom', a wooden tympanum rescued from destruction by a rain shower that washed away the post-reformation whitewash which had covered it for more than four centuries. In the Doom, which hung in a conspicuous position above the chancel arch, Christ sits in judgement, looking on as the souls of the recent dead have their sins weighed and are either welcomed into

heaven by St Peter and his angels, or are dragged off by demons and devils into the gaping mouth of hell.

Purgatory - a kind of limbo between life and death - was the place where torment was suffered to atone for sins committed in life, but one's period of suffering could be shortened on earth by good deeds such as charitable works and pilgrimages. Prayers for the soul of the departed held special weight in obtaining 'time off for good behaviour', especially when delivered by the priesthood. Wealthy individuals built private chantries - such as those at Lavenham and Dennington churches, where masses could be sung for their souls, but the vast majority of people clubbed together in gilds, paying priests to recite the names of all members in their prayers.

Gilds provided a club where camaraderie and support was available to all who paid their annual subscription, and an assurance that on death, members would receive funeral rites. Much time would be spent rehearsing plays and processions to be held on the anniversary of their chosen saint or festival. Ale would be brewed



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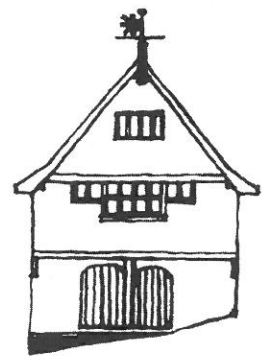
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to raise funds for their church, with which they would be intimately linked. Pensions could be provided to members who fell on hard times and almshouses built for poor members to live out their days in old age.

Kings Lynn is known to have had 70 gilds with varying levels of subscription, and there is no doubt that a certain level of elitism existed. Bardwell Gild in Suffolk had over 100 souls listed (though it is not always clear if they were all alive!) and included a minstrel and a cook among its officers. An annual meeting, the equivalent of our modern AGM, would elect an Alderman who would in turn appoint the Gild Officers.

Some of Suffolk's finest buildings were erected by these gilds before their abolition in 1547, and Leigh explained that there were tell-tale signs to indicate a former gildhall. The remainder of his talk showed us numerous examples.

Among the characteristics to look for were a large open space, in which feasts and rehearsals for their plays could be held, perhaps with a smaller room for 'committee meetings'. A close proximity to the church allowed the churchyard to be used for processions and plays. Felsted Gildhall, now Felsted School, is a good example.

Often rented out as court-halls, gildhalls would be used much like a village hall today, for private and public meetings and functions. Their meeting halls were almost always found on the first floor, providing an ideal opportunity to produce an income from renting the space below; many incorporating shops in their ground floor. Another useful give-away is the level of decoration in the gild's meeting hall, which would often have finely carved roofs or ceilings - trying to out-do those of neighbouring parishes. In common with most public buildings they were usually unheated, and some, like the hall of Saints Peter and Paul in Lavenham, also had accommodation for priests.

Leigh showed us Eye Guildhall, positioned right beside the church, which although much restored, is a finely carved building with jetties facing into the churchyard. Other fine examples include Nayland, quite a late hall opposite the church with a large hall upstairs and incorporating two shops, a stair tower to the rear and evidence of a garderobe. Palgrave, in north Suffolk, situated across the road from the church, has a multi crown-post roof and until recently was not recognised as a gildhall. It had two service rooms, a kitchen where the parlour would be in a domestic building, and still incorporates an original serving hatch from the stair tower.

Yaxley, which SHBG members visited a few years back, has a 17ft wide chimney for the preparation of gild feasts, while at Bardwell Gildhall, the fireplace takes up the entire width of the building but started life as a 'short-stack' timber-framed chimney, with smoke escaping through an open frame in the roof. Parts of the original sooted daub are still there. Fressingfield, now the Fox and Goose Inn, is jettied into the churchyard with a fine corner post, and was built as a 'church house' for rent to the gilds and anyone else. It is still owned by the church today.

Two well known examples are Hadleigh and my own at Lavenham. Hadleigh began life as two separate buildings, the Market House and Gildhall. This is a complicated building, with the multi crown post roof being brought from elsewhere after the Reformation. It has the remains of a detached kitchen in the grounds, which until the 1950's was largely intact.

At Lavenham, we have the exception to all the rules; the Gildhall of Corpus Christi lies at the heart of the commercial area rather than close to the church. The hall is on the ground floor, with lots of smaller rooms upstairs. It has a cavernous attic, presumably for storage, and direct access to the cellar from the street. One of four known to exist in the town in the early 16th century, members of the Corpus Christi gild appear to have been

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low in number - its meeting room is smaller than many domestic examples - but very wealthy, perhaps the 'crème de la crème' of Lavenham's rich clothiers.

The oldest religious gildhall known in Suffolk is at Clare. Documentary evidence dates it to around 1380, and it had a ground floor open hearth behind its street frontage and a 'processional' entrance passage with an ogee arch.

Some buildings may give the appearance of being gildhalls, but were in fact built for other purposes; the famous mid 15th century example at Thaxted was in fact built as a Market House, though may well have been used by the gilds too. The 'Marriage Feast Room' at Bures Hamlet was also probably shared by the gilds.

Leigh showed us the spectacular roof of a building at Stansted that looked just like an old barn. Clearly it had been dismantled after the Reformation and reassembled where it could be made use of. This was a fate that befell many gildhalls.

The Reformation brought an end of the close links that gilds provided between religion and ordinary people. Their abolition must have been a severe blow to the thousands of men and women for whom gilds provided a sense of security, welfare and belonging. Many gildhalls were sold off and are now disguised as houses or rows of cottages, but there are still lots out there awaiting discovery.

Leigh's plea to members to scour the county for other fine examples must surely have sent everyone scurrying out to find them.

Jane Gosling

FURNITURE AND FITTINGS

A talk by Linda Hall on the 9th December 2005

The Unitarian Church was as usual filled to capacity for our annual Christmas Event encouraged by the reputation of Linda Hall, well known for her 'Bible' of period house fixtures and fittings. There has been a new book published in 2005 by Countryside Books (not the CBA as before) with added examples, a much wider date range and a more extensive description of every possible fixture and fitting one might find. Linda was facing an impossible task to cover the whole book in an hour; however she managed to include an amazing variety of features including many from East Anglia and a number from Hampshire. This is an area she has been concentrating on with many illustrations in the recently published book 'Hampshire Houses 1250-1700' by Edward Roberts. Linda explained the importance of recording these details because so many are still being lost, often because new owners are unaware of their importance and age.

Linda covered the evolution of the change in style of doorframes from the two-centred arch, used until the early fifteenth century, through to the four-centred arch built until the late seventeenth century (figure 1). Tiptofts, Wimbish in Essex, built circa 1300, is a local example featuring a two-centred arch. Two two-centred

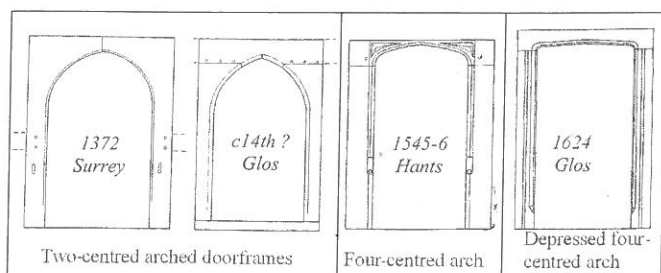


Fig 1:

doorways standing side by side in the cross-passage, leading to the service rooms, can often be seen in East

Anglian houses of the fourteenth century. An example of three two-centred arch doorways in a row was shown at Stantons, Black Notley. The central one is sometimes wider and may lead through to a detached kitchen. Ogee doorheads (figure 2) are more common

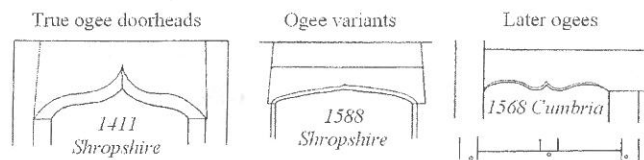


Fig 2:

in the west and the north of the country, although an example from Maldon in Essex was illustrated. They are constructed in stone until the late seventeenth century; however the majority are of wood construction beginning in the early fifteenth century. The ogee shape becomes less prominent later.

The shouldered arch (figure 3) is another shape seen more commonly in the West Country, but an example from the White House Wacton, Norfolk was shown.

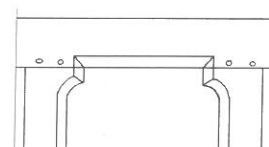
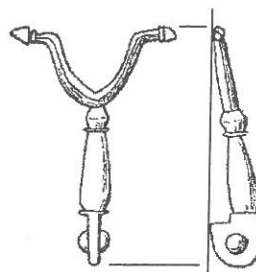


Fig 3:

In relationship to doors we were shown examples of door handles, doorframe mouldings and the plank construction of doors. Linda showed examples of door hinges and a 1638 example from Suffolk of a spur knocker (figure 4). Doors were generally hung on long strap hinges with a loop at the end that hangs on a stout iron hook called a pintle. The



1638 Suffolk

Fig 4: