

LEICESTER CASTLE,
LEICESTER, LEICESTERSHIRE
THE COURTROOMS IN THE
FORMER GREAT HALL
HISTORIC BUILDINGS REPORT

Pete Smith



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SUMMARY

The Great Hall at Leicester Castle is listed at Grade I and also Scheduled as an Ancient Monument. The building has been in the ownership of Leicester City since it was closed as a courtroom in 1990. The building is now used by the Leicester Museum for storage, though the courts are open for educational visits on request. The courts have also been used as the setting for a number of television programmes. This report has been requested by Louise Brennan, Historic Buildings Inspector for the East Midlands Team who has been approached by Leicester City Council, who are considering possible alternative uses for the building.

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NMR Swindon

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THE COURTS AT LEICESTER CASTLE, LEICESTER

The former Assize and Quarter Sessions Courts, and later County Courts, are housed within the former Great Hall of Leicester Castle.

The Great Hall of Leicester Castle

This Great Hall was built in the 12th century as part of the post-conquest castle. It was originally an aisled hall with timber aisle posts, though these posts have been removed on the east side and buried within later walls on the west side. The original clerestory was removed and the roof replaced in the 16th century (fig. 1); between c.1502 and 1530 according to recent dendrochronology results.¹



Fig. 1. The interior of the Great Hall in 1821, showing the Assize Court fittings at the south end.

The building was given a new brick east front and a new east aisle in the late 17th century (fig. 2). The interior was divided up into three spaces in the 1820s when the present courtroom fittings were installed. The building was altered by William Parsons, the County Surveyor, who remodelled the west front and rebuilt the west aisle between 1856 and 1858.² Since then relatively minor alterations have taken place within the building.

The Courts

The Great Hall was in use as the Assize Courtroom from 1273 until 1888 when it was purchased by the County Justices. It then became the location of the County Courts which were finally closed in 1990. The building has remained largely unused since. This means that the building was in use as a courtroom for over 800 years. It has one of the longest running records of court usage in England; only beaten by Oakham Castle which has been used as a courtroom since 1229 and which is still in occasional use as a courtroom today.

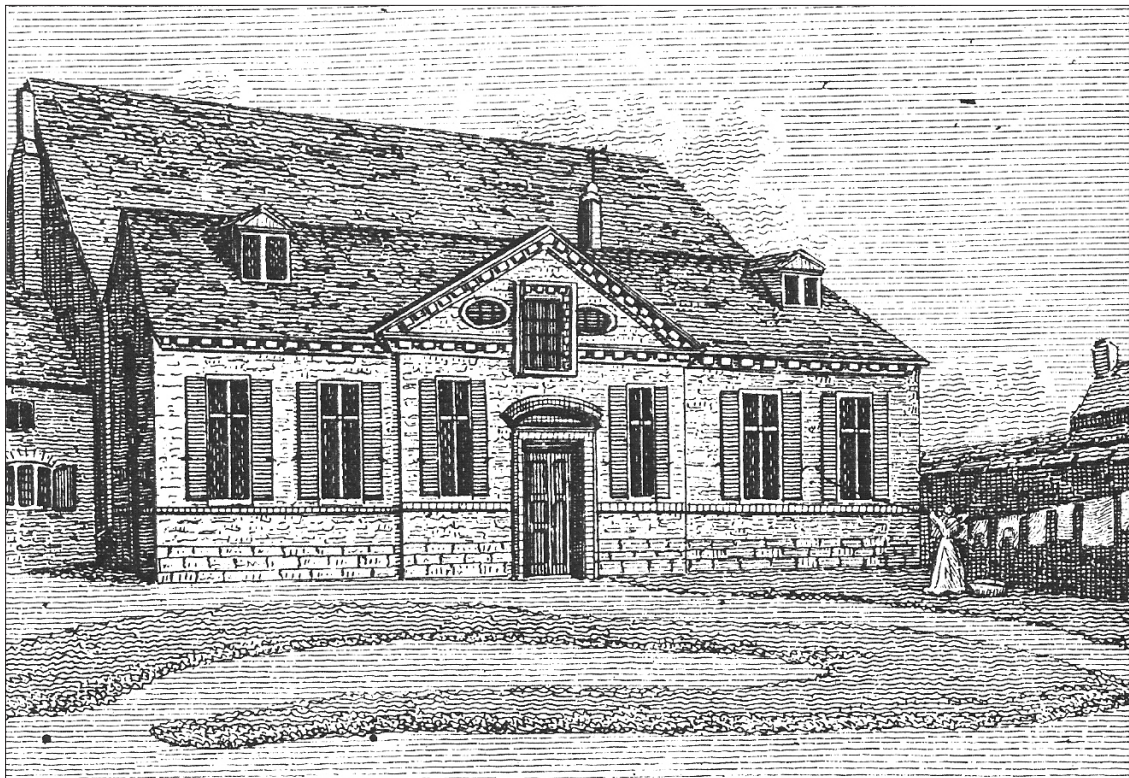


Fig. 2. The east front of the Great Hall in 1815, showing the new brick façade and east aisle added c.1695 before it was altered in the 1820s.

The new east façade (fig. 2) added in c.1695 was part of an internal re-modelling of the Great Hall which involved the installation of permanent courtroom fittings. An engraving of the interior of the Great Hall in 1821 (fig. 1) shows these fittings at the south end for the Assize Court; there were similar fittings at the north end for the Quarter Sessions Court. This engraving clearly shows that at this date the hall was still a single open space.

This arrangement of courts at either end of a single space, with no division between them, was common at this time. The fittings for each court were very basic; they included a raised dais and a central table with benches around it. The prominent spiral stair visible in the engraving of 1821 (fig. 1) led to an upper room lit by the windows in the pediment. This room presumably provided accommodation for judges and court officials and possibly the court records. This arrangement was swept away in the later 1820s when the present courtrooms and central hall arrangement was introduced.



Fig. 3. The east front of the Great Hall as altered in the 1820s.

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The rapid increase in urban population in England in the early 19th century – Leicester’s population rose from 17,000 in 1800 to 50,000 by 1850 – led to the rebuilding of the court facilities in many towns and cities across the country. The increase in crime and the development of the prosecution and defence counsels roles’ within an adversarial system during the 18th and 19th centuries led to a need for more complex and specialist fittings within courtrooms. Many towns and counties built elaborate new courthouses with purpose built courtrooms containing modern fittings. A good number of these early 19th century courtrooms survive throughout England; the most elaborate being at Lancaster Castle designed by Thomas Harrison and J M Gandy.

Leicester County opted for a different solution; rather than build a new courthouse it decided to build new courts within the Great Hall of the Castle. This involved a complete rearrangement of the interior of the Great Hall. The aisle posts were removed on the east side whilst those on the west were encased within walling and two new cross walls

(from east to west) were inserted dividing the hall into three. The central space became the combined entrance hall and stair hall, flanked by two separate courtrooms, one to the north for the Quarter Sessions and the other to the south for the Assizes. The remodelling of the central hall also involved the alteration of the 17th century brick east façade. A new doorway was added and a Venetian window was inserted at the first-floor level which necessitated the alteration of the pediment above (fig. 3). A new two-storey wing was added to the south of the Great Hall containing the barristers' rooms, and cells were installed below the south, Assizes courtroom.



Fig. 4. The west front of the Great Hall altered by William Parsons 1856-58.

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In 1856-58 William Parsons, the local County Surveyor, carried out further major alterations to the building. These alterations were largely involved with the rebuilding and raising of the western aisle of the Great Hall to provide better accommodation for the officers of the court and the judges. The west front of the Great Hall was strengthened and heightened in brick (fig. 4). New windows, with plate glass sashes, were inserted on the semi-basement, ground and first floors. This range was also given a new hipped slate roof. The enlarged service rooms are very plain internally. Alterations were also made to the cells below the courts; these were extended eastwards and refitted at this time. The barristers' rooms, attached to the south end of the Great Hall, were also extended to the west.

Fabric Analysis - The Interiors

The Central Hall

Internally the central hall has a lobby divided off by two steps and a 20th century glazed screen. The hall and lobby both have Minton tile floors added by William Parsons in 1856-58. At either end of the entrance lobby there are large round-headed doorways with panelled doors, which originally led to the public galleries. The hall itself has four panelled doors leading into the courts (two to the north and two to the south) with plank panelling and fixed benches between. The west wall has three arches, that to the left is blind with a doorway inserted in 1856-58, which leads down to the semi-basement on the west side. The other two arches lead to two stone stairs. These comprise a grand return flight stair opening through the larger central arch and a single flight enclosed stair rising from the arch to the right. The latter rises directly to the upper floor on the west side and was presumably a private access for the court officials whilst the former was for public access to the upper side galleries. The main stair has elegant early 19th century iron balusters, though the arrangement of this stair was radically altered by William Parsons in 1856-58, when the western aisle of the Great Hall was remodelled. The first landing to the west gives access to the judge's rooms and the second landing leads to a large room over the hall. This room retains a number of early 19th century panelled doors with reeded doorcases and bold patera plus a stone fireplace with similar patera. The early 19th century Venetian window, which lights this stair, has baseless Greek Doric half-columns between the lights, a most unusual example of the Neo-Classical style then much in vogue. There are doors from this room giving access to galleries in the courtrooms. The top landing leads to further staff accommodation on the west side added by William Parsons (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. The upper flight of the main stair, altered 1856-58, re-using the 1820s iron balustrade.

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The south Criminal Courtroom

This courtroom has a raised dais along its west side (fig. 6). This west wall is panelled with a continuous canopy above. The panelling is early 19th century, though the upper tier of panels appears to have been reused at a later date, probably when the canopy was added in the later 19th century. The canopy has a central ogee hood over the judge's seat; this seat has a back panel topped with the royal coat-of-arms dating from the same period. This west wall has doors leading to the accommodation for court officials rebuilt in 1856-58. The panelled front to the judge's bench is early 19th century, though extended in the later 19th century, the clerk's desk in front is largely 20th century. The three rows of painted benches, which occupy the centre of the court and have panelled backs and curvaceous bench ends, date from the 1820s. The witness box to the north is panelled with curved corners; it has a separate access doorway from the entrance hall. Most of this panelling dates from the 1820s but it has been altered, re-ordered and re-used. There are panelled benches to the side of the witness box.



Fig. 6. The south Criminal Courtroom, showing the fittings inserted in the 1820s, with later alterations.

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Above is a long narrow gallery with an iron balustrade most likely inserted in the 1820s. Behind the central benches is the dock, with panelled sides which appear to have been altered and cut down at a later date (fig. 6). It has steps leading down to the cells below. The seating on the south side also dates from the 1820s though it has again been altered and re-ordered and the benches replaced with 20th century seats. Along the east wall are benches for the public added in the mid-20th century. Behind this the former public gallery for the lower orders (standing) has been reduced in width to make room for this later seating, it was originally accessed via the large round-headed doorway from the entrance lobby. The narrow upper gallery on the north side was probably used as the press gallery or for members of the public during exceptionally popular trials.

The north Civil Courtroom



Fig. 7. The north Civil Courtroom, showing the curved benches installed in the 1820s.

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This courtroom is similar to the south courtroom, though it retains more of its 1820s fittings. It too has a raised dais with back panelling and a canopy with a central ogee hood over the judge's seat on the west wall. Again the upper tier of panelling appears to have been reused when the canopy was added in the later 19th century, and the judge's seat has a back panel with coat-of-arms. The wall panelling continues along parts of the north and south walls. The clerk's desk in front of the judge's bench is 20th century. There are four central benches which are curved with curvaceous bench ends (fig. 7).



Fig. 8. The north Civil Courtroom, the surviving standing rail in the public gallery.

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Fig. 9. The south Criminal Courtroom, the public seating inserted in the 20th century.

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This use of curved benches was popular in the early 19th century in civil courts. The witness box is sited on the south side in this court, again it has panelled sides with curved corners. There is further seating on the north, here the benches have been removed and replaced with chairs and the back panelling has been reduced in height. All along the west side is bench seating for the public which appears to have been altered in the later 19th century. The original public gallery behind this seating survives intact with its central standing rail (fig. 8), this area is accessed from the double doors in the lobby. As in the Criminal Court, the narrow upper gallery on the south side was probably used as a press gallery, or for extra public seating.



Fig. 10. The north Civil Courtroom, the panels in front of the judge's seat showing the four original central panels and the later panels added at either side.

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Survival of the Courtroom Fittings

At first sight it appears that both these courts retain most of their original 1820s fittings, in fact these fittings have been extensively altered and reordered, reusing the original panelling. The fittings are constructed of panelling which looks old fashioned for this period. This is probably because these fittings were made by local joiners; the additional later 19th century fittings were made to match. Some 20th century reordering has taken place; notably the modern clerks' desks and the modern public seating in the Criminal court. The most prominent changes are the canopies added over the judge's seating, probably altered after the courthouse was sold to the County Justices in 1888. The

panels in front of the judge's seating in both courts appear originally to have been only four panels wide (fig. 9), they were extended across the whole width of the west walls in the 19th century, possibly re-using original panels robbed from the side walls where the panelling appears to have been cut down. The north Civil Courtroom retains most of its 1820s fittings and underwent less alteration in the later 19th century than the south Criminal Courtroom.

Comparison with other Courts

Since the court rebuilding programme of the 1990s instituted by the Lord Chancellor's Office, many hundreds of courtrooms have become redundant. A large number of courtrooms, both still in use and redundant, survive from the same period as these courts at Leicester Castle, the early 19th century. Many are much larger, more elaborate and much better preserved, and almost all these examples are in new purpose built buildings, as at St Albans Town Hall and Courthouse (1829-33), Presteigne Shire Hall (1826-29), Boston Sessions House (1843), Lincoln County Hall (1822-28), Lancaster Shire Hall (17889-89 and 1802-21) and Bodmin Shire Hall (1837-38).³ There is also a small number of much earlier courts still surviving in England, some with their 18th century fittings intact, such as Beverley Guildhall, Dorset County Hall and South Molton Guildhall.⁴

What is unusual, and probably unique, about these courtrooms in Leicester is the fact that they were rebuilt inside the Great Hall of the castle in the early 19th century. Virtually every other set of courts built at this time was housed in splendid new civic buildings. Presumably the authorities responsible were not prepared to spend the large sums of money needed for such new courtrooms. The conversion of the castle and the design of the new entrance and stair hall show signs of the fashionable Regency style in the staircase baluster, the doorcases, the fireplace and the Doric columns to the Venetian window. But the courtrooms themselves, which are relatively small and cramped, have old-fashioned style panelling, made no doubt by a local joiner. These fittings do not survive completely intact from the 1820s. They have been re-ordered and altered significantly, re-using much of the original panelling, in a series of campaigns during the 19th and 20th centuries. A number of additions were made to these courtroom fittings in the mid-20th century.

Importance

There can be no doubt as to the historic and architectural importance of the Great Hall itself. The new brick façade added c.1695 is an impressive example of the domestic style of the late 17th century, though it has little of the architectural presence of the magnificent contemporary stone façades found at the Derby Shire Hall (1659) and at the Northampton Sessions House (c.1680).⁵ The large scale remodelling of the building and the new courtrooms built in the 1820s are an interesting example of early 19th century court architecture. Not because of their high quality craftsmanship or for their architectural design, but rather for their unusually small scale and their retention within the traditional setting of the castle Great Hall. Even where other towns rebuilt their courts within their original castle settings, they all built entirely new buildings on these

sites, as at Lancaster, Carlisle and Lincoln. Only at Oakham Castle do we find a similar retention of the courts within the Great Hall, though here the arrangement of courts, which survives only in part, is an example of an earlier form of open courts. So these courts at Leicester are unique in showing not only the type of layout found in the early 19th century but still surviving within a traditional medieval setting. It is this continuity of usage through 800 years and the provincial quality of the surviving fittings which makes the courts at Leicester Castle of special interest in the architectural development of judicial system.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Alcock & Buckley, 1987, 73 and n. 4.
- 2 Colvin, 2008, 783-84.
- 3 Pollard, SAVE, 2004, 130-31, 126-27, 70-71, 100, 97, 66-67.
- 4 Pollard, SAVE, 2004, 60-61, 138-39.
- 5 Pollard, SAVE, 2004, 81-83, 118-19.



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