

TENTERDEN TOWN HALL

HISTORY COMPILED BY MR. J. WELLER, 2015



The development and history of Tenterden has been determined largely by the wool industry, ship building and the grant of a Charter of Incorporation by Henry VI in 1449. This gave the townsmen many privileges, among them the right to choose of themselves a Bailiff and commonalty.

It is therefore not difficult to assume that a regular meeting place was established where the administration and courts could be held, and an early reference is made to a Court Hall.

In 1509 Thomasino Piers left 3s 4d, by will, to repair the footway between the house of Hugh Parker and the Court Hall, but no indication was given as to where the Court Hall was located.

A new Charter was granted to the town by Queen Elizabeth I in 1600, after which the post of Bailiff was advanced to Mayor.

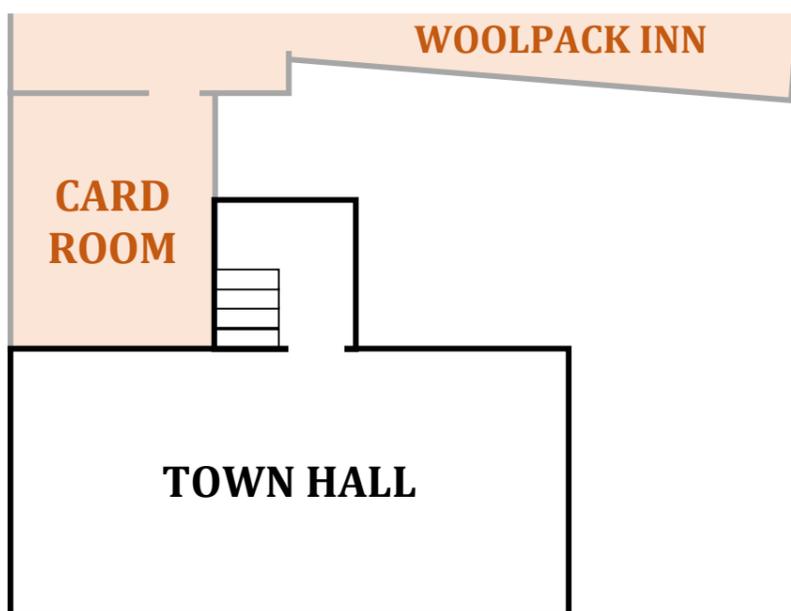
On 19th March 1661 Richard Burden, a freeman of the town and carrier by trade, was confined to prison for debt. He set fire to the place by which means the Court Hall was burnt down and many valuable records, including the Charters, were destroyed.

The rooms comprised;

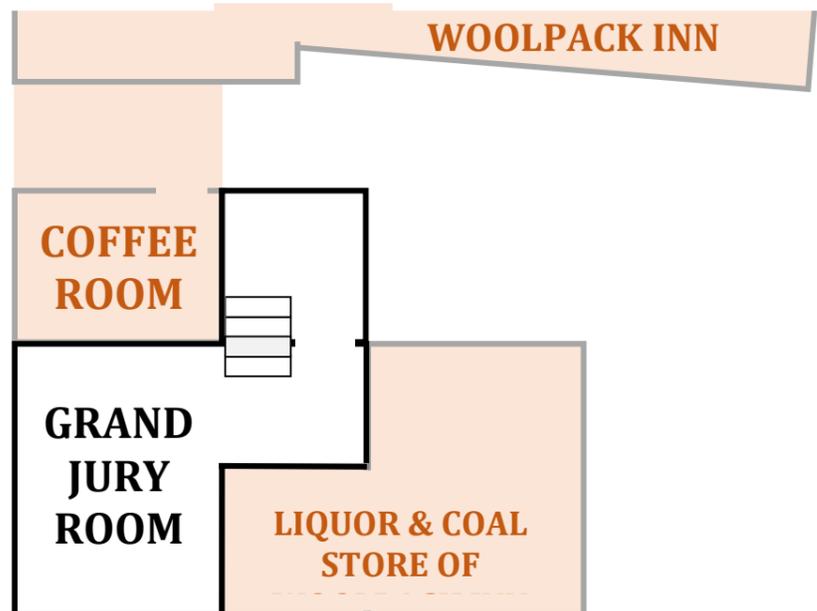
- (a) on the ground floor the Grand Jury Room together with a small room comprising a public passage behind the Grand Jury Room and the Club Room,
- (b) On the first floor the Guildhall [or Town Hall] being over the Grand Jury Room and such other part of the new buildings used for storage of liquor and coal by John Samson, and
- (c) Three chambers above the Guildhall or Town Hall together with a lobby and stairs.

Access was to be made through a gateway and a small part of the yard of the inn. The Royal Coat of Arms, which today hangs above the fireplace in the Assembly Room, dates from 1792.

FIRST FLOOR - 1792



GROUND FLOOR - 1792



By present day standards there were a number of unusual conditions forming part of the lease, including provision for John Samson, his heirs and assigns to use the Guildhall, Grand Jury Room and chambers to entertain His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury together with any Bishop, Clergy and Company at his Grace's or Lordship's visitation or confirmation at Tenterden. Indeed, various Archbishops undertook visitations to Tenterden and stayed at the Woolpack.

In addition, the Grand Jury Room could be used for the entertaining therein respectable guests and companies coming to and stopping at the inn and for no other purpose (provided that the Grand Jury Room was not required for any jury or witnesses attending the court) without paying anything for its use.

The three chambers over the Guildhall could be used by John Samson as lodging and sleeping rooms for decent, sober and clean guests and customers of the inn not being soldiers or their families. The chambers could not be used as a dwelling, habitation or for the storage of a comprehensive range of goods and products. The occupants were not to annoy or interrupt the Mayor, Jurats or Commoners in their full and free use and enjoyment of the Guildhall.

These arrangements were confirmed by an indenture dated 5th day of April 1792 made between John Samson and Richard Finch on the one part and Richard Curteis Mayor and the Jurats and Commoners and other inhabitants of the Town and Hundred of Tenterden on the other part.

In May 1862 the Watch Committee of the Corporation was instructed to consider “the best mode of lighting the Hall” at a cost not to exceed £45 [*approximately £3,750 in today’s money*]. Such lights were to replace the chandeliers. By 10th November that year the bill of Messrs Francis for the installation of “sun lights” was authorised to be paid.



This arrangement continued until the evening of Monday 15th September 1879 when a fire occurred following a marionette show held in the Town Hall. This destroyed the ceiling and roof. The Kentish Express suggested that the fire had originated around one of the “sun light” gas lamp fittings which had been installed some years earlier.

Following the fire, a Special Meeting of the Council was held in the Woolpack Inn on Friday 19th September 1879. It was resolved, among other things;

- (a) Mr. King (Senior) of Ashford be appointed to survey and report on the damage and to report with proper specifications and estimates,
- (b) As soon as the surveyor has been down Mr. Barns see that the Hall is covered in, and
- (c) The Town Clerk ascertain if the rooms over the Town Hall may be dispensed with.

On 2nd October 1879 the next regular monthly meeting of the Council held at the Town Clerk’s office resolved “the Town Council take control of the Fire Engines”. However, it was felt that it was inexpedient to expend a large sum in the repairs of the old engines, but that the engine and appliances recommended by Shand and Mason, as stated in their letter, be purchased by the Council at the total cost of ninety-eight pounds ten shillings [*£8945 in today’s money*]. It was further resolved the new Fire Engine when purchased be placed in the Market House.

It was further resolved the claim for damages be sent to the Kent Fire Insurance Society amounting to;

Damage to Town Hall and adjacent property:	£265.0.0	[£24,060 today]
Plus:	£6.12.6	[£602 today]
Use of Fire Engines:	£17.11.6	[£1596 today]
Bricklayer and Carpenter:	£3.0.0	[£272 today]
TOTAL:	£292.4.0	[£26,530 today]

Again the Town Clerk was asked to apply to Arrowsmith Bros. as to whether they would give up the use of the rooms over the Town Hall.

By 10th November 1879 the Town Clerk reported the insurance claim had been paid and on 18th December tenders for the rebuilding work were deferred until Messrs Arrowsmith's reply was to hand.

Mr. J. W. Arrowsmith attended this meeting and consented to the three chambers above the Court Hall being done away with, the Council on their part assuring him that the use of the Court Hall as heretofore used, with the consent of the Mayor for the time being, would not be withheld.

Confirmation by letter of 30th December 1879 from Messrs Arrowsmith was received that they formally agreed to relinquish the rooms over the Town Hall and accordingly on 1st January 1880 the Town Council agreed to accept the quotation from Mr. Warrington in the sum of £324.16.0 [*£28,880 in today's money*] provided the Town Clerk was satisfied the same included a new floor.

In April 1880 it was agreed the means of lighting for the Town Hall was to be by eight "star lights" with the gas meter being placed in the Grand Jury Room.

Also in early 1880 plans were considered for a new entrance to be made to the Town Hall. In May a petition was lodged by the Tradesmen of the Borough objecting to the fixed portico over the pavement. The following month a revised estimate for this work amounting to £160.6.9 [*£14,250 in today's money*] was accepted. A lavatory was also to be constructed at a cost not exceeding £30 [*£2,667 today*].

The first meeting of the Council to be held in the Town Hall, following the fire, took place on 9th November 1880.

On 14th May 1881, to avoid litigation, the Council agreed to pay Mr. Warrington £269.14.3 [*£23,980 today*] less £17.17.0 [*£1,587 today*] paid to Messrs Wells and Co. for iron works and £35.15.6 [*£3,181 today*] due to Mr. Elliott.

The addition of the balcony, at a cost of £130 [*£11,560 today*] had to wait until May 1912 for approval.



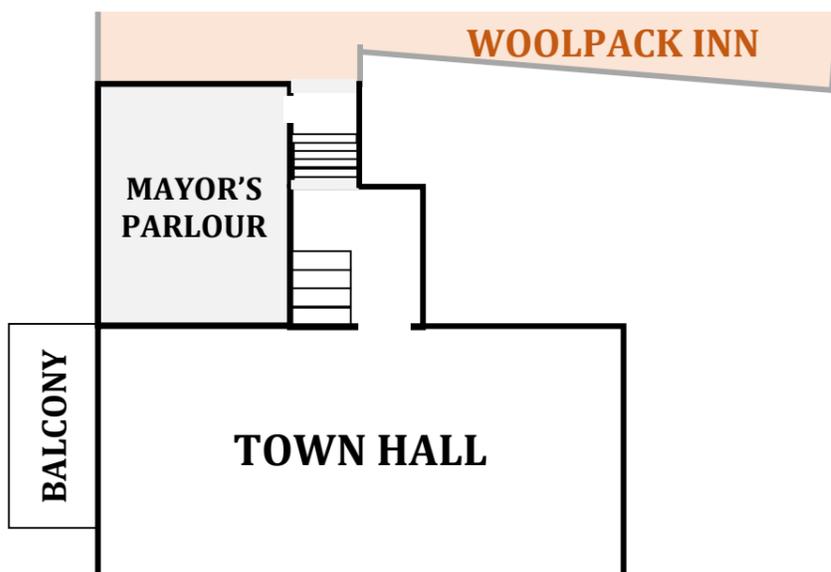
In the 1920s the Mayor and Corporation began to resolve the complex arrangements whereby the Town Hall (Assembly Room) was partially located over a store of the Woolpack Inn and the owner of the inn had rights of use of both the Grand Jury Room and the Town Hall.

On 4th February 1922 Harry Judge, Alderman and Justice of the Peace for Tenterden, who was owner of the Woolpack Inn, entered into an agreement to (a) convert the lease of 999 years into a fee simple, and to (b) relinquish all privileges of the owner for the time being of the Woolpack Inn with regard to use and access to the Grand Jury Room and Town Hall.

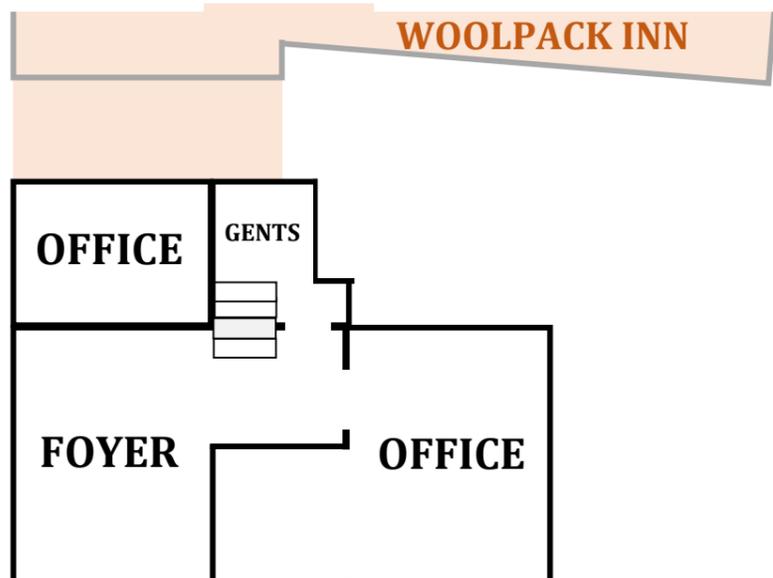
On 6th February 1922 Harry Judge entered into a second agreement with the Mayor, Aldermen and Councillors to convey to the corporation (a) the rooms under the northern part of the Town Hall, and (b) the stable to the north of those rooms together with a right of way. This agreement also made provision for the doorway between the Town Hall and the Woolpack Inn to be permanently closed and blocked by the vendor his heirs or assigns should they so desire.

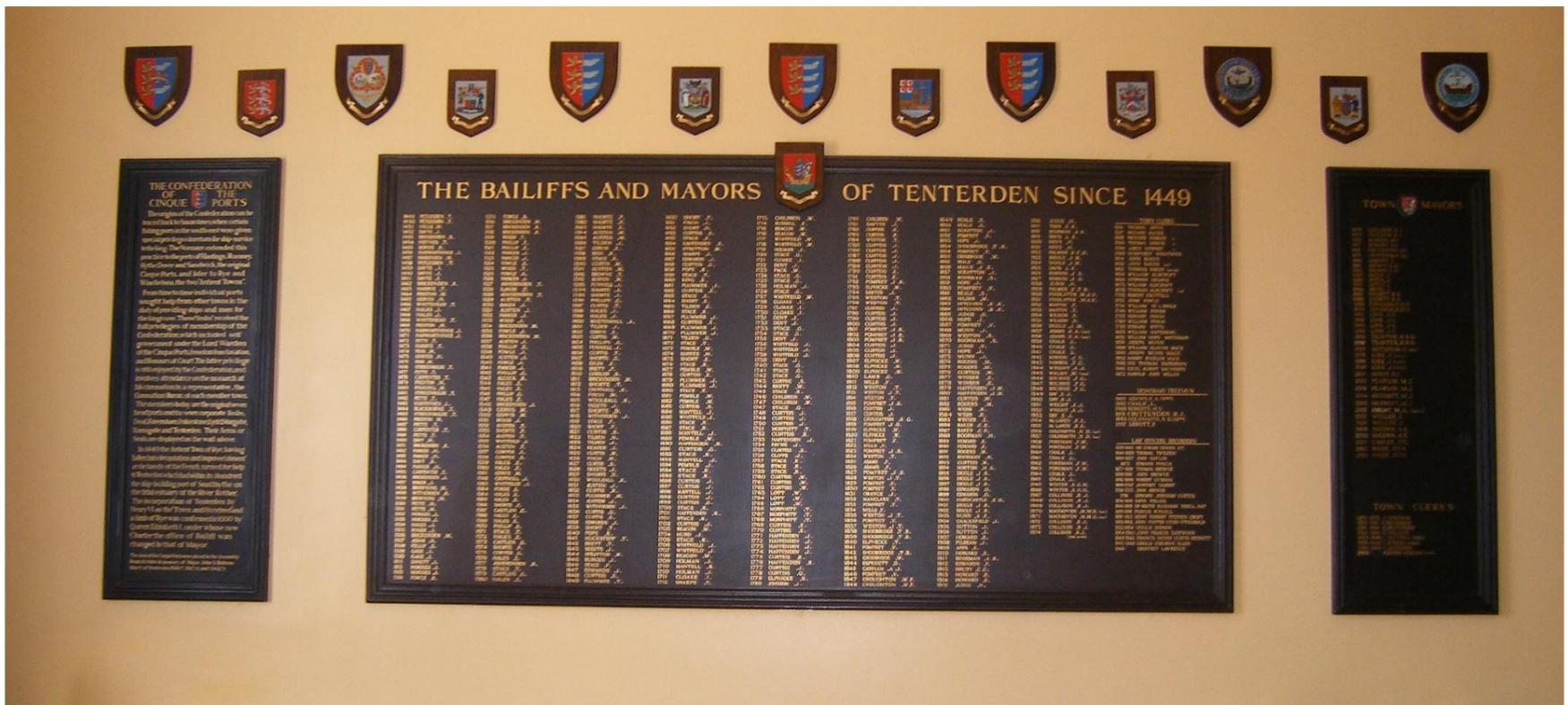
The period of consolidation was concluded on 23rd October 1925 by the purchase by the Corporation of Tenterden of the Commercial or Coffee Room on the ground floor and the card room on the first floor immediately above the Commercial/Coffee Room together with the roadway under the arch to the west of it and adjacent land all for the sum of £600 [*£30,560 in today's money*].

FIRST FLOOR - 1925



GROUND FLOOR - 1925





An extension to the Town Hall was made in 1936. On the ground floor it consisted of the Town Clerk's office and the two rooms to the north, and on the first floor a stage and kitchen were added.

More recently the Tenterden Trust aided the restoration of the Assembly Room in 1973. At this time a Venetian window designed by Frederick MacManus ARIBA was installed by H. W. Wiggins & Sons in 1973 at a cost of £682 [*£7,366 in today's money*]. In addition, over £200 [*£2,160 today*] was spent on improvements, lighting and decoration. The fender for the fireplace was designed by W. Ironside.

In the Assembly Room a board records all of the Bailiffs and Mayors from 1449. Also included are the Law Officers, Freemen of the Town and Town Clerks. Above the board are 14 shields displaying the Coats of Arms of the Members of the Confederation of Cinque Ports. The larger shields are those of the original Head Ports and the two "Antient" Towns. The smaller shields are those of the Limbs, Tenterden being the Limb of Rye.

