**The Guildhall / York Past and Present Guildhall Tours Residents Weekend 2017**

Report by Helen Graham, Centre for Critical Studies in Museums, Galleries and Heritage, University of Leeds in collaboration with Lianne and Richard Brigham as part of the My Future York research project, 14th February 2017.

‘[The Guildhall] is such an old, historic building that has been at centre of the city's history and decision making for so long. It's very important to the City’ (quote from the Residents Weekend Guildhall Tour Survey)

**York Past and Present** is a facebook group which was set up by administrators Lianne and Richard Brigham in 2013 and since then has attracted 14,500 online members and has also become a dynamic face-to-face community through coffee morning meet ups, Christmas parties and projects in collaboration with local heritage organisations (York Chocolate Story; Mansion House; York Explore Archives).

Since 4th October 2014 York Past and Present (YP&P) have been running volunteer-led tours behind the scenes of the Guildhall, including during two residents’ weekends (2016 and 2017). In this time they have introduced 2000 people to the Guildhall and its history. As part of their partnership with the Guildhall, they have also been active in the Mansion House Heritage Lottery Fund project, with YP&P members volunteering to pack up and photograph the house before the renovations began. The Guildhall tours have now come to an end in advance of the proposed changes to the Guildhall. Through a longstanding research collaboration, YP&P with the Centre for Critical Studies in Museums, Galleries and Heritage, University of Leeds, decided to take the opportunity of the final Residents Weekend to interview and survey those that took part. We wanted to evaluate the tours as well as to understand better the meaning of the Guildhall to people who live in York and what they would like to see in terms of its future development. Overall 61 surveys were returned – in person and online – which represents close to 25% of those attending that weekend.

**Key findings:**

***Question 1: What did you enjoy about the Guildhall tour?***

The tours were well received, particularly the feeling of getting to look ‘behind the scenes’.

‘The opportunity to go to the places I had never seen before’.

‘The revealing of the hidden gems’.

‘Chance to see parts of the Guildhall not usually accessible’.

‘Being allowed to see behind the scenes - especially Common Hall Lane’.

‘I enjoyed feeling like I got to see something that most other people don't (though perhaps that

will change)’.

‘I saw things I had only read about - a long ambition fulfilled’.

*The way* the tours were done – by an enthusiastic volunteer – was also noted as important. The idea that tours might continue in the future either by YP&P or by others was suggested.

‘I really enjoyed the History, the Enthusiasm of the Guide and seeing all the parts I had never

seen before’.

‘I would like to see it preserved as it is, sure there has to be upkeep on the building so if needs be then introduce a small fee for the tours to help with the up keep. I would love to see this advertised’.

‘Not sure if it is regularly open to the public but [I would like to] see more tours - maybe led by historians’.

***Question 2: Why is the Guildhall important to you? / Why is the Guildhall important to York?***

The sense of the Guildhall as being a key in the development of York was foreground by all respondents. A phrase used over 25 times was ‘Part of York’s History/ Heritage’. This was directly linked to the development of civic engagement and local democracy.

‘It is part of York's heritage. It's ours and not for sale. I'd liked to see it looked after’.

Yet there was also a strong connection made between history of York, the history the development of Guilds and the development of local democracy. This was seen as a crucial ‘York story’ that could be told through the Guildhall.

‘The Guildhall is the physical manifestation of democracy in York, following those periods when the king and the church dominated influence in the city. Of course the facility to vote - originally with a small number of rich men - has changed enormously (thankfully!) so the Guildhall is a symbol of ever-changing democracy’.

‘The Guildhall should be the centre of 'York's Story' […] a chance to see democracy and engage with it’.

‘The Guildhall is a real treasure of York, and should be seen by as many people as possible. It would also help if the local community could learn how local authorities operate on behalf of the community’.

***Question 3: What would you like to see for the future of the Guildhall?***

There was a consensus that the building needed to be maintained, pay for itself in some way but also still be publically accessible.

Some – in a response to the current plans – explicitly mentioned their support for the historic fabric to remain intact (a reference to the proposed new doorway in the main hall).[[1]](#footnote-1)

‘It would be a shame to destroy 100s of years of history for a door! It is also not necessary to move or alter the fabric of a building to allow more people into a room’.

‘It should remain open and maintained - maintain the fabric for its medieval appearance’.

‘The Guildhall proper is an integral part of our history, and its fabric must be left undisturbed by developers’.

A number of people noted the importance of economic viability. Others made specific suggestions. There seemed very little concern about the proposed extensions and restaurants in the wider complex.

‘The Guildhall complex must not remain a burden to local Council Tax payers. But development must respect the past’.

However, support for the proposed extensions and commercial additions was related to continuing *public access* to the Guildhall and Council Chamber, with a clear interest expressed in the shared civic story with the Mansion House.

‘I would like to see the continuation of the Guildhall tours, which are so illuminating. I would be happy to pay a reasonable fee to go on them’.

‘There should be an official tour of this building as many people would certainly pay good money to get what we were given freely today’.

‘Preserved and put to use for all with public access’.

‘The main hall, staircase and council chamber should be open for tours on a regular basis, maybe combined with a visit to the Mansion House’.

The argument for future public access was very often made on the basis of its civic and democratic significance.

‘I also think that improved public access could act as a catalyst that might improve public engagement with the council and local politics. There's something to be said for seeing the place where the council meets and decisions are made’.

There was a strong sense of the importance of this story for people who live in York. There was also a desire to share this with visitors.

‘It is a magnificent building and one that should be showcased to the 1000's of visitors York gets every year’.

‘It should be preserved and open to York people and visitors’.

‘It's unique features must not be squandered, but presented to the wider public, i.e. Visitors’.

‘A major part of York's history that should be celebrated and accessed by both residents and visitors’.

**Specific ideas arising from the tours and surveys:**

In terms of the specific issues under consideration for planning permission, **there was no objection to the plans that would see restaurant and commercial uses in the wider complex**. There were **specific objections to the new doorway** into the Guildhall as it was seen as interfering with the historic fabric of the building.

Overall the responses invite a strategic recognition by City of York Council of the importance of the building and the opportunities it presents. The surveys responses indicate two questions that the Council might consider further:

* How might the work currently being done by the Mansion House on interpreting the site and York’s civic history be integrate with public access to the Guildhall and Council Chamber?
* How might the traditions and meanings of the Guildhall be drawn on to invigorate and support local civic and democratic engagement in York today?

**Recommendations:**

* Create one ticketed entrance to Mansion House which includes the Guildhall and Council Chamber for visitors to the city. This should include free access to people who live in York, as is already planned by the Mansion House.

**Ideas:**

* Build on the living traditions of the Guildhall – as the Chamber still used for Council meetings – to create a hub for wider public democratic engagement in current issues facing York. The aim of this might be to use a variety of creative methods to enable more people to feel confident in participating in local democratic processes (from voting to ward committees to planning process) and well as enabling wider civic engagement.[[2]](#footnote-2)
* Use the idea of local democracy as a living tradition to develop a visitor experience for Mansion House / Guildhall which engages this city’s visitors with the links between York’s past, presents and future. For example, temporary displays could look at a specific issue (flooding; housing; Castle Gateway) and explore the histories of the issue and open up questions about how the city should handle the issue in the future. This could be in the vein of ‘Urban Lab’ experiments developed elsewhere.[[3]](#footnote-3) Strategically this would ensure a tourist experience to York which is far from ‘in aspic’ but actively deploys connections between the city’s past and future. Such an approach could act as a bridge between the city’s strengths in both heritage and media arts and between the city’s cultural entrepreneurs, its students and long standing local communities.

Full data on which this report is based can be found via myfutureyork.org

The research collaboration between Helen Graham, Lianne and Richard Brigham began with an Arts and Humanities Research Council-funded project ‘How should decisions about heritage be made?’ (2013-2015) and has continued in the My Future York project, which aims to use local histories to increase community participation in shaping York’s futures. A full list of publications can be found via our two project websites: heritagedecisions.leeds.ac.uk / myfutureyork.org

1. It should be noted that the respondents were engaging with the experience of the tour and the significance of the Guildhall to them and to York, rather than to detailed plans related to the proposed future uses of the Guildhall. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The idea of a hub for debating York and planning was also raised by Lisa@York Stories on one of her recent guest posts for myfutureyork.org [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Urban Labs or Living Labs seek to link local government with local people through various forms of co-production. For example see: <http://www.urbanexp.eu/urban-labs> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)