

A History Set in Iron?

A Revision of the History of Tewkesbury's Town Hall, 1788-1857

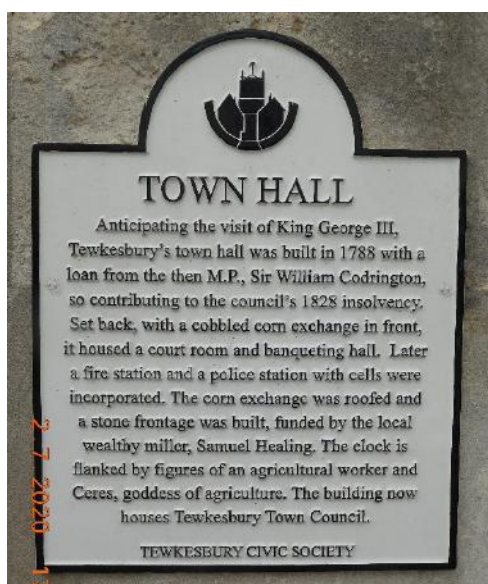
John Dixon assisted by Wendy Snarey and Joanne Raywood

A. The Commemorative Plaque

It is all too easy for history to be “set in stone – or iron? In studying history, we make assumptions about the veracity of facts, without revising what is “certain” and checking against new and different knowledge. It is frustrating that conclusions always, therefore, have to be regarded as provisional and subject to revision.

I made assumptions that I knew about the history of the Town Hall and that, in particular, that Sir William Codrington made the Town a loan of £1,200, with which they not only built the present classical Town Hall but also bankrupted the Town in the process.

I thought the best place to start was with the permanent source of information: the plaque recently affixed to the façade of the building.



1. *Anticipating the visit of King George III* suggests a causal linkage that needs investigation; we do not know when the King's court announced his visit, but it was clear his main focus was on Cheltenham to “take the waters”. Anthea Jones does not even state that the King visited Tewkesbury, but quotes from *Fanny Burney's Diary*. The lady made her own visit to Tewkesbury and was fascinated by the “Cathedral” [sic] and its pews, which “seem the most unsafe, strange, and irregular that were ever constructed”. **There is no mention of the Town Hall**, although Jones states that “he was interested in architecture and attentively surveyed the outside of the church”.¹ The Council had resolved in 1772 to replace the *Tolsey*² with a new building in the High Street. The erection of that building was announced on 9 October 1788 – whereas the visit of the King was in July. I doubt if the King would have been interested in the then modest Town Hall, being built and as illustrated by James Bennett.

I would recommend that the plaque read *Tewkesbury's Town Hall was built in 1788, replacing a Tolsey Hall at the Cross*

2. *With a loan from the then MP, Sir William Codrington*

Did Codrington provide a gift or a loan which bankrupted the Town in the 1830s, as I assumed?

Kathleen Ross does not mention the financing of the Town Hall and neither does Jones. The authoritative *British History Online* states “In 1788 Sir Christopher Codrington built a new Town Hall or Tolsey in High Street and presented it to the corporation”. It was late Norah Day who firmly stated that “the £1,200 came from Sir William Codrington” - and even the authoritative online article was incorrect in citing Christopher. He, 1668-1710, established the family name as Philanthropists but he died ‘without issue’ and bequeathed his vast estates to his nephew, Sir William the first Baronet [?-1738] whose son was this Tewkesbury MP. Miss Day did suggest that they borrowed part of the money elsewhere, but we can find no evidence of this. In fact, a careful reading of the page shows that she was talking mainly of the improvements to the Cross, and the other contributor was rival MP James Martin:³

every Friday. They borrowed the purchase money from various local people but the £1,200 for building the new Town Hall came, as I said previously, from Sir William Codrington.

The Council Minutes agree: 1788: “an elegant and commodious edifice was erected by Sir William Codrington Bart., then M.P. for the Borough” at a cost of £1,000.⁴ **So not a loan of £1,200 but a Gift One should, therefore, rewrite: a gift of £1,000 from the then MP, Sir William Codrington.**

“Contributing to the council’s 1828 insolvency: if it was a loan is that the case? If it was a gift what caused the insolvency? **As it was a gift, this can be omitted**

3. What follows seems accurate about the **Corn Exchange** except a **date** would be helpful

“the Corn Exchange was roofed, and the classical stone frontage was built in 1857...”.

Therefore, the classical façade was added to the Town Hall then – and was not the result of Codrington largesse - which is what I have always assumed.

*The building stands in front of the Town Hall and covers the space of ground which was formerly a gravelled front court facing the high street. **It presents a classical front of the Doric order, and comprises four columns, an entablature, and a pediment surmounted by a bell turret; the centre of the pediment is pierced for a clock.***⁵

4. **Should Healing alone receive the credit?**

“...funded by the local wealthy miller, Samuel Healing.”

It appears that Mr Healing was the Mayor at the time of the building but there is no evidence here that he “funded it”.

Tewkesbury Record of 11 November 1857: The number of gentlemen who sat down to the dinner - which was served by Mr Trotman, of the Swan Hotel - was 192.

*Amongst them were Sir E. A. H. Lechmere, Bart., the Rhydd;**G. H. Banaster, Esq., Mayor of Tewkesbury;**; most of the professional gentlemen and many of the tradesmen of the town; and a great number of the farmers and agriculturists of the neighbourhood. **The chair was occupied by S. Healing, Esq., J P., late Mayor.***

What follows seems unnecessary to challenge.

<u>Which assumptions have been revised?</u>	<u>Suggested new wording for the Plaque</u>
1. I accept that Codrington gave the money to the Borough so the fact that the Corporation was almost bankrupt in the 1820s was not due to this non-existent loan. The near bankruptcy was caused, not by the cost of the Town Hall, but by the problem of the Old Corporation living beyond its means, as indeed were many such councils.	<i>Tewkesbury’s Town Hall was built in 1788 with a gift from the then M.P., Sir William Codrington. Set- back, with a cobbled corn exchange in front, it housed a court room and banqueting hall. Later a fire station and a police station with cells were incorporated.</i>
2. The façade was built by 1857 when the Corn Exchange was roofed over and paid for by a subscription of local businessmen, at the time when Samuel Healing was the Mayor.	<i>The Corn Exchange was roofed, and the classical stone frontage was built in 1857, funded by local businessmen under the chairmanship of the then Mayor, Samuel Healing. The clock is flanked by figures of an agricultural worker and Ceres, goddess of agriculture. The building now houses Tewkesbury Town Council.</i>

B. A “Simplified History” of the “Bankruptcy” of the Old Corporation

The near bankruptcy was caused, not by the cost of the Town Hall, but by the problem of the *Old Corporation*⁶ living beyond its means, as indeed were many such councils. This all helps explain why the *1835 Municipal Corporations Act* was necessary. This Act reformed local government in all the incorporated boroughs of England and Wales. The legislation was part of the reform programme of the *Whigs* and followed the *Reform Act 1832*, which had abolished most of the ‘*Rotten Boroughs*’ for parliamentary purposes. Tewkesbury was such a ‘*Rotten Borough*’, electing two aristocratic MPs; this

did not change until 1868. The members of the Corporation were eventually replaced by newly elected councillors, of whom – we thought - **James Blount Lewis** was the first elected Mayor. There was a lot of confusion at this time of significant change – Mr. Lewis actually stood down, to be replaced temporarily by the Town Clerk, **Lyndsey Winterbotham**.⁷

As I found this matter of the “*Bankruptcy*” very baffling, I have sought help from my collaborator, Wendy Snarey, to understand it.

In 1833 the new ‘*reformist Whig*’ government set up the **Municipal Reform** Inquiry which considered the ‘*Insolvency of Corporations*, like Tewkesbury.

The Town’s **income** then totalled **£22 11s 8d** [£22.58p] from market tolls and house rents from *Gloucester Row* [now *Abbey Terrace*], the *Market Hall* in Barton Street⁸ and the *Gaol House*⁹. **Expenditure**, however amounted to **£66.2.0d** [£66.10p] mainly because of salaries. As Mr Micawber would have explained: “*Annual income £22, annual expenditure £66, result municipal misery*”.¹⁰

Already in 1828, the Corporation was in debt for **£6,000** and several creditors had to release their debts, only receiving compensation of 6s. 8d. [33p] in the £. This totalled c£1,980 and, accordingly, **£2,000** was advanced by **Mr. J.E. Dowdeswell**, the *Recorder* and then Town MP, on condition that the whole of the remaining property of the corporation was mortgaged to him as security.

By 1836 the debt had increased to £3,000, no doubt because of unpaid interest. The secured Parish Property was worth only £1,500 yet the MP generously agreed to accept that. Bennet reported at the time that they wished to benefit from the sale of the *House of Industry* - but that had to be approved by the *Poor Law Commissioners* in London.¹¹ In the meantime five sufficiently wealthy councillors were prepared to cover the shortfall with a shared loan - again with council property as “*security*”.

In the event, however, the sum of £300 was paid to Dowdeswell, raised from the sale of some parish property [e.g. Lord Lechmere bought the right to receive ground rent from Abbey/Gloucester Row¹²; Nathaniel Hartland (a wealthy Quaker Tanner) bought the *Manor*, with diverse rights over such things as fisheries, while solicitor, Anthony Sproule, purchased the reversion of the *Market House* at the Cross. That left £1,200 - £900, which the *Directors of the Poor* received from the sale of the House. This was loaned to the Corporation at 4% interest.

The other £300 was raised in mortgage from James Blount Lewis, one of the original five, secured on the remainder of the *Gloucester Row* houses. This £300 loan changed hands subsequently – Mr Packer was the first, followed by Mrs. Rebecca Bell.

Mrs. Bell’s executors, however, discovered that no interest was being paid by the Town Clerk, **Joshua Thomas**. Indeed he did not bother to pay any interest or principal on several loans the Council had [**the outstanding money on the old 1828 debt included**] – nor did he distribute money owed to many of the Town’s Charities and nor did he claim from the Treasury the costs of running the Court for them. When this was discovered, the Council was told it was far too late to claim any recompense – so, when he disappeared in 1856 to the USA, even the new council was still in deep financial trouble.¹³

The £300 loan was not written off there as it was transferred to **William Brydges** and, eventually, to *The Oddfellows Society* – so, in the 1880-1881 Accounts, interest was still being paid on both the £900 and the £300 loans!

C. The Revised History of the Town Hall

We believe that Tewkesbury had a Town Hall or *Tolsey* from 1585 when a **Town Hall was built at an expense of £53-17s-7d**.¹⁴ As far as we know, no picture exists but it could have been of a similar design to that one at Ledbury, still extant. By the late 18thC, the Town was in a mood for improvements and in 1787 Common Council stated that *the pavement of the Church Street and near the houses adjoining, the present Tolsey or Town Hall [should be] taken up in order to lay the new paving of the said street, the communication between the High*

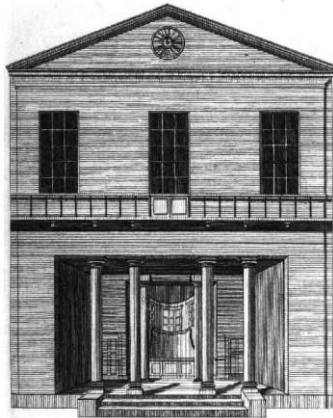


Ledbury Market Hall - still standing today [British History Online]

*Street and the Church Street was become much obstructed and impeded by reason of the houses, insomuch that it was almost impossible for carriages to pass.*¹⁵

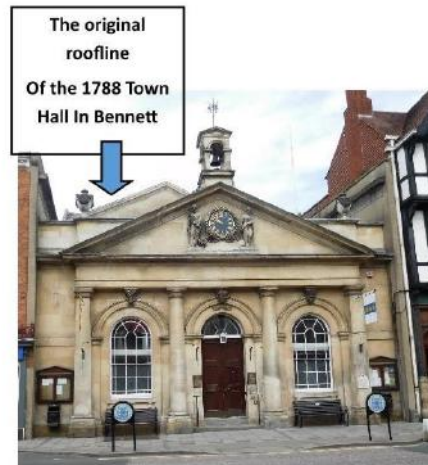
There was a debate as to whether the new Town Hall should be built on the same site but, for the reasons above at the same meeting, the Chamberlain restated a resolution of 1772 that that the new *Tolsey* or Town Hall shall be erected upon the site, whereon Buildings now stand, with Garden Ground belonging to the Corporation in the High Street.¹⁶

The finance of the new building was announced by the *Bailiff*: ***“he was authorized by Sir William Codrington, Bart., to declare that he was desirous and ready at the expense of £1000 to erect and complete a Town Hall for transacting the public business of this Borough”.***



The TOWN HALL, TEWKESBURY.
Published by Dyde & Son, Printers 1790.

Bennett’s 1830 Illustration of the 1788 Town Hall was based on this 1790 *Dyde* version
Note the Balcony [removed in 1857], the supporting columns and the cobbled yard



The 1857 Façade in 2020 with the roof line of the 1788 Town Hall. Note the elegant clock and *cupola*, described by Bennett

The site was cleared by September 1785 with materials auctioned at the Maidenhead Inn¹⁷ and in 1788: ***“an elegant and commodious edifice was erected by Sir William Codrington Bart., then M.P. for the Borough at a cost of £1,000”.***¹⁸

The building was described by Bennett in 1830:

- on the ground floor was a large, paved area, separated from the court by four circular pillars supporting the front of the structure, behind this the hall in which Quarter Sessions were held and adjoining the Town Clerk's office.



- *A spacious stone staircase leads to a handsome banqueting or ballroom, which is neatly fitted up and ornamented.* The former ball room since 1963 the Council Chamber – with the ceiling beautifully restored by the modern Council in 2009 [Brian Reeve]



Portrait of Sir William Codrington in Town Hall [author]

- “with an admirable portrait of the founder, painted by **Sir William Beechey**”. **Beechey** was the official portrait artist for Queen Charlotte; he painted Codrington twice with a date of 1789 in one of his account books; one cost £21 [£2,670] the other £10.50 ¹⁹

- *On the same floor is a large Drawing room used as a Council Chamber and as a place of meeting by the Commissioners of the Streets and other public bodies.*

Today it is the **Mayor’s Parlour** and it is remarkable that the room could hold 16 councillors efficiently for so many years – as it was in 1957.



Council Chamber 1957 - now Mayor's Parlour [Register]

Bennett adds that “a small cupola was placed on the top of the original structure for the reception of a bell, and the court between the street and the building was intended for holding the Corn Market, and that the open [cobble] space on the ground floor was used for pitching the corn which might be brought for sale.

In 1839 the Corporation ordered that the Town Hall should be repaired and improved. **A police station** with three temporary cells for prisoners, and an office for the town’s firemen were created in the basement and this room became the place where the fire engine was kept.

Beyond the glass screen are the Town Council offices. When this building was first built, there would have been a hall beyond the screen, in which the Quarter Sessions were held and, to the left there was the Town Clerk’s office. ²⁰



The Office screen behind which was the Court Room and Town Clerk’s Office



The room on the right – now the Town Clerk’s Office before the Court room with a door to the cells



Route to the cells below



The cells today as a storage area

D. Improvements to the Corn Exchange, 1857

I was always slightly confused about the difference between the *Market House* at the Cross in Barton Street, which was designed for the sale of merchandise, and the use of the cobbled area of the Town Hall for marketing corn – and evidently the farmers were unhappy with being in open air.

So it was in 1856 that the farmers wanted somewhere to market their corn “in the dry”, and so the *Corn Exchange Co [CEC]*²¹ made proposals that the corporation grant to the CEC a lease of the **ground in front of the town hall for 30 years at a nominal rent, on the following conditions:**

1. *The building to be approved by the council.*
2. *to include the **present fire-engine room, under the town hall, the company undertaking to provide an engine room elsewhere,***²²
3. *The company to **use the small room adjoining the court for the Inspector of Corn Returns.***
4. *The building to be repaired by the company and to be returned to the corporation.*
5. *Town Hall business was not to be interrupted.*

What is interesting is that “*Mr Fryzer would take out the stone columns of the Town Hall, with the doors and the windows, bring them forward a few yards, re-erect them, and cover the intervening space with a glass roof, which might be done for £200 [today £18,830]. The building would fetch an annual rental of £40.*”

The Company, formed in June 1856, saw the Corn Exchange opened in November 1857 “*it would prove a great boon both to the town and neighbourhood - many times he had been sorry to see gentlemen, dealers at the market, standing in the streets drenched with rain; their only chance of getting out of the storm was to go into a miserable alley next the Cross Keys, where they caught colds, and which alley was now shut up. In future they would have a good room to deal in and good shelter. He should be most happy to pay 3s-0d a year for the accommodation, and who would not do that rather than have a wet coat?*”²³



The “Stone Columns” of Bennett’s illustrated Town Hall moved forward to grace the newly covered in Corn Exchange



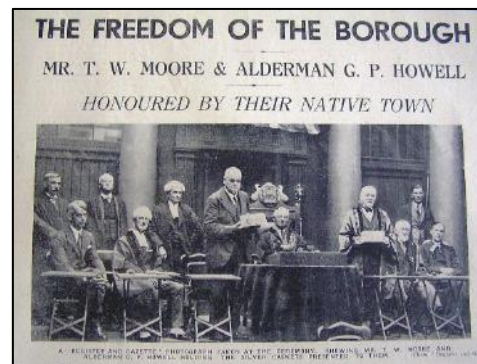
The graceful but bright – and dry – Exchange looking to High Street

Opening of The New Corn Exchange: 11 Nov. 1857²⁴

The ceremony took place on the day of the monthly fair and consisted of a public dinner attended by nearly two hundred of the principal gentry, farmers and tradesmen of the town and district. **The building stands in front of the Town Hall** and covers the space of ground which was formerly a gravelled front court facing the high street. It presents a classical front of the Doric order, and comprises four columns, an entablature²⁵, and a pediment surmounted by a bell turret; the centre of the pediment is **pierced for a clock**; the dial plate is 3ft 1in. In diameter and is surrounded by a fillet of stonework beautifully carved in imitation of a wreath of wheat, barley, and hops. On each side of the dial stands a figure, the one "agriculture," an old man, semi-nude, holding an ancient plough; the other, "ceres," a young female, draped, bearing a sheaf of grain. The bell tower stands eight feet above the top of the pediment, and is open on four sides, showing the bell and hammer, and giving free egress to the sound, which is thus borne over the entire town. The exterior height of the building from the pavement to the top of the pediment is 30 feet, from that to the top of the turret 8 feet, and from thence to the highest point of the weather-vane 6 feet, making 44 feet in all. **Mr Collins executed the stonework, and Mr Knight the carpentry.** The two figures were sculptured by **Mr Frith, of Gloucester²⁶**; and the architectural ornaments were carved by Mr Morgan, of Birmingham. The number of gentlemen sitting down to dinner - served by Mr Trotman of the Swan Hotel - was **192**.



Plough dated 1835 situated on the 1856 extension



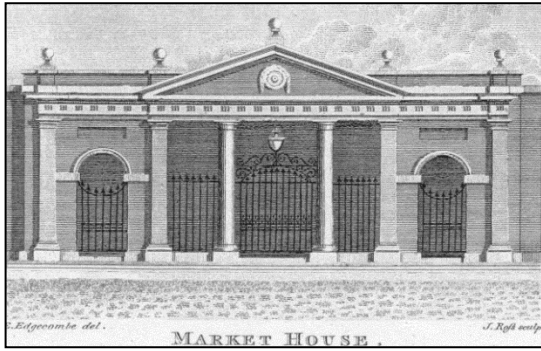
1935 A Public Meeting [Register]

E. The Market House

The former **Market House** now provides the site for the present Methodist Church. It fits into Tewkesbury's history from 1789 when it was financed by businessmen who entered a 99-year lease with the Corporation to pay ground rent to in return for the right to levy tolls on those who sold merchandise there.

Later 1839 the area in front of the Town Hall was being used for buying and selling corn which meant that traders complained of elements interfering with their business. This was rather strange as, at exactly the same time, the Council decided to accept the gift of c£1,000 - not only to build a Town Hall but to leave an open space in front of it to act as another Corn selling area.

In the same financial crisis of 1828-1837, the council decided to sell the remainder of the 99-year lease on the **Market House** to a consortium led by Anthony Sproule and then to wine merchant, William Moore. His relation, auctioneer John Moore, also bought shares. Pigs had been sold down by the Swilgate, so the Oldbury proved a better location. The growth of a competing cattle markets in Station Street [now under the "Kremlin" Shopping Centre] and the adjacent railway caused financial problems so the **Market House** was sold to the Wesleyan Church, underwritten by **Thomas Collins**, who built the Methodist Church in 1878 – which now hosts public meetings for *Tewkesbury Historical Society* – to replace their smaller chapel in Tolsey Lane.²⁷



Bennett's familiar 1830 drawing of the Market House



1878 Methodist Church [J Dixon]

¹ A. Jones *Tewkesbury* [1987] pp 130-132; supported by *British History on-line*:

² Historically this was a **tollbooth** at which merchants' *tolls* or *taxes* were collected. It could also mean a merchants' meeting place or **Exchange**. See below p 4

³ *Tewkesburian, They used to Live in Tewkesbury*, 1991 [Sutton] p84. Bennett [*History* p183] adds that in 1790, MPs Codrington "*liberally contributed*" £500 as did James Martin £300.

⁴ *Register* - 16th May 1942 quoting minutes to the meeting of the Common Council on the 9 October 1788; it is *Tewkesburian* fn3 above who states £1,200. In 1788 £1,000 is worth £127,100 [www.measuringworth.com]; "the new Town Hall at Tewkesbury was built by Handy Edgcombe, joiner, John Collins, mason, William Blackbourne, London architect. It was built at the expense of Sir William Codrington [sic]." Daniel C. Beaver (ed.), *The Account Book of the Giles Geast Charity* [2017 BGAS] p362.

⁵ D. Verey in [<https://britishlistedbuildings.co.uk/101206399-town-hall-tewkesbury#.XvNkUdiSmM8>]

⁶ The modern *Town Council* was previously known as the *Corporation*, certainly in the early 19th Century.

⁷ This important episode is worthy of an article – and a biography of that controversial Town Clerk.

⁸ For greater detail, see D. Willavoys, **TWESBURY MARKET HOUSE**, [THS Bulletin 15]

⁹ The site is now occupied by the Parish Hall and *Touching Souls* cafe.

¹⁰ Charles Dickens's 1850 novel *David Copperfield*, chapter 12.

¹¹ The *Shepherd's Mead* retirement complex is housed in the building, known from 1793-1834 as the *House of Industry*; from 1834-1929 it was known as the *Union Workhouse*; in 1929 the institution of the workhouse was abolished and taken over by County Councils, as *Public Assistance* institutions. With the introduction of the Welfare State it became *Holm Hospital* [for the elderly] until it was in 1996 and redeveloped.

¹² When the houses were built, the Corporation agreed on condition that ground rent would be paid for the remainder of the 99-year lease.

¹³ Joanne Raywood. *THS* would appreciate a member researching an article on **Joshua Thomas** for a future Bulletin [deadline 31 Oct] In 1898 the Borough Surveyor, **William Harrison Grey**, fled to South Africa after embezzling £3,800 council money. See J Dixon, *WH Gray, A Corrupt Victorian Official*, THS Bulletin 17 [2008].

¹⁴ James Bennett's *History of Tewkesbury* [1830] p192-3 stated 1586 was the date

¹⁵ Common Council minutes of a meeting on 25th June 1787

¹⁶ Resolution of Chamber of 10th March 1773, confirmed at a meeting on 25th June 1787

¹⁷ Or *Star & Garter* in Barton Street; from 1805 second Baptist Church.

¹⁸ *Register* - 16th May 1942 quoting minutes to the Town Hall was made at the meeting of the Common Council on the 9th October 1788; the figure £1,200 was used by *Tewkesburian* in fn2 above.

¹⁹ W Roberts biography 1907, printed in *Forgotten Books* on-line.

²⁰ J. Raywood: Tour of Town Hall notes [unpublished].

²¹ *Tewkesbury Weekly Record* 28 January 1856 [Wendy Snarey, June 2020]

²² We believe that the Fire Station was located in Station Street before transferring to Mill Street.

²³ Mr. Barnard, Apperley landowner, then living at Notcliffe House, Deerhurst Walton. The former Inn, *the Cross Keys*, has been divided and converted into *Greggs Bakery* and the *Midland Bank* at 11/12 High Street.

²⁴ *Tewkesbury Weekly Record of that date*

²⁵ **Entablature**: The upper part of a classical building supported by columns or a colonnade, comprising the architrave, frieze, and cornice; **pediment**: Triangular gable forming the end of the roof slope over a portico

²⁶ Thomas Collins, builder and Mayor 1890, 1892-5. **Henry Frith**: born c1820; died 1863; active: 1841 – 1863. He was a Wood carver, stone carver, sculptor, possibly also silversmith By 1850 Frith had settled in Leicester where he ran a sculpture, stone and wood carving business which was employing two masons, a boy and an apprentice in 1861. Soon after this he moved to Gloucester where he died in 1863.

²⁷ In 2020 used by *Tewkesbury Antique Centre*. [3,970 words]