



Bedfordshire
county council



Moot Hall – Restoration

Moot Hall, scheduled as an Ancient Monument in 1934, was donated in 1950, by Major Simon Whitbread, to Bedfordshire County Council as a restoration project for the Festival of Britain.

Bedfordshire County Council set up a FoB Committee to organise: restoring Moot Hall; setting it up as a museum and; organising the opening ceremonies. Much of the organising was carried out by the chairman of the CC, Sir Thomas Keens, and the Clerk to the Council, Mr JB Graham.

The restoration was planned by the County Architect, Mr S Vincent-Goodman and the deputy County Architect Mr William G Walmsley, in consultation with the Ministry of Works (Ancient Monuments)/ JAP Woolford was the architect-in-charge. The Council commissioned a local building firm, run by John Corby, as the main contractor. His craftsmen were given full scope to use their own abilities.

Whilst most of the main structure was found to be in good condition, the whole of the west gable had to be taken down and rebuilt with new timber, the roof stripped and re-tiled. Brick and concrete foundations were built under the original framework and the bricks between the timbers of the frame were re-laid, as were some in the chimney stack, using second-hand bricks, from a dismantled brewery in Ampthill. Bitumastic materials were added to all wall surfaces, to prevent damp penetration and to insulate. The upstairs ceiling was opened up and the west window and staircase were also moved back to their original positions. Brick-paved floors were laid. Oak doors, of period design, and windows were made. The oak for the project came from a 15th century barn in Essex that had been recently demolished. The total restoration cost was £4,000.

The opening ceremonies took place on Thursday 31st May 1951.

Amongst those invited were Mr John Corby and all his craftsmen who had carried out the restoration of the Hall. Two men from the Ministry of Works were also invited, together with an architect from Bournemouth – a Mr WB Stonebridge – who, presumably, had assisted the County architects.

The proceedings commenced with a celebration service at Elstow Abbey, conducted by the Reverend SV Hartley. Bunyan's hymn "Who would true valour see" was sung, the lesson was read by JW Alexander, minister of Bunyan Meeting Church, and the blessing was given by the Bishop of St Albans, Reverend EM Gresford-Jones. Then the Bishop of Litchfield Dr ES Woods, gave an oration on John Bunyan. The Abbey was filled to capacity and the service was relayed to people waiting outside Moot Hall.

Then the ceremony moved out of the Abbey, across the green to Moot Hall, where Alderman J Arnold Whitchurch invited Sir Thomas Keens to conduct the official opening ceremony and he presented Sir Thomas with a token gift - a copy of *The Pilgrim's Progress*. The County Architect, Mr S Vincent-Goodman, then handed Sir Thomas a specially-made casket containing a commemorative brass key, made by County Councillor WT Hobkirk. The casket was made by JT White & Sons Bedford out of oak from the Moot Hall. On the sides are the arms of Sir Thomas and Major Simon Whitbread, the new County coat of arms and the emblem of the Festival of Britain. Carved into the lid is a bas-relief of Moot Hall. On the fob of the key are two engravings; on the front (at the instigation of the County Architect) is the former Abbey seal and, on the obverse, an outline drawing of Bunyan's statue.

Sir Thomas spoke of how they were meeting under the shadow of a great loss, the sudden death, on Monday 28th May, of the Clerk to the Council, Mr Graham. Sir Thomas described how Mr Graham had 'thrown himself with his usual determination and enthusiasm into all matters in connection with the Festival of Britain'. Sir Thomas told the gathering that Mr Graham's family had agreed that today's proceedings should be carried out without any change and he conveyed everyone's most sincere sympathy to the family.

Sir Thomas then said that this memorial to 'one of Bedfordshire's greatest sons' had been made possible by Major Simon Whitbread having gifted the Moot Hall and the village green to the County Council.

He then unlocked Moot Hall, using the commemorative key - - whilst declaring that he was opening Moot Hall 'to the glory of God and for the use of all citizens in perpetuity and as the main contribution by the County to the Festival of Britain'.

Many people then toured the Hall and looked at all the exhibits, including an exhibition of Bunyan relics (now in the Bunyan Museum, Bedford) and 17th century furniture and pictures.

The people who had been invited to the official opening then repaired to Elstow School for tea.

Moot Hall was then open to the public daily, except Sundays and Mondays, from 11am to 1pm and from 2pm to 6pm. Mr Wright, doorkeeper at Shire Hall, was given the (additional) task of being Moot Hall's custodian.