**St Mary’s Guildhall**

**Guide to records**

**Coventry Archives** is located in the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, Jordan Well, Coventry, CV1 5QP. Admission to both the Reading Room and Research Room is free. Documents and books can be consulted without charge, but a charge is made for photocopying or the taking of digital images. Visitors are required to make an appointment to view original documents in the Research Room. Material in the Reading Room is available without the need of an appointment.

**Opening hours:** The Coventry Archives Reading and Research Rooms are open, 10.30 am – 3.30pm, Wednesdays – Fridays; the Reading Room is open on alternate Saturdays, 10.30 am – 3.30pm. Please refer to the Coventry collections online catalogue at <http://coventrycollections.org/> or further details, or telephone on 02476 237583.

**Introduction**



Image Credit: [Historic Coventry](https://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/tour/content.php?pg=guildhall)

Until 1917, when the first Council House was built, Saint Mary's Hall was probably the most important place in Coventry. During the Middle Ages, the three meetings of the Court Leet were held in the hall every year. In January, the Mayor and the city's officials were chosen and at Easter and at Michaelmas, they settled problems and passed laws for the good government of the town. The Mayor and his council of advisers met at Saint Mary's Hall to discuss important matters. The town's armour was kept there and its money and treasures stored for safe keeping.

The Hall first belonged to the Holy Trinity Guild, an association to which all the most important people in Coventry belonged. It was named after the first guild which met there, the guild of Saint Mary, which started in 1340. In 1392, four guilds – Saint Mary's, Saint Katherine's, Saint John's and the Holy Trinity guild – all joined together to form one large association. A bigger hall was needed to accommodate all the members at meetings and so much of Saint Mary's Hall was rebuilt between 1394 and 1414.

When King Henry VIII closed the Coventry guilds in 1547, he took their lands and property but Coventry Council was able to continue using Saint Mary's Hall by paying the next King, Edward VI, a large sum of money and an annual rent of £90. Markets were sometimes held in the hall; cloth was sold there in the sixteenth century, linen, flannel and cloth in the seventeenth century, and even fish at the end of the eighteenth century.

There are many parts to Saint Mary's Hall. Fronting Bayley Lane is the western wall of the great hall, the gatehouse and the city's old law courts, which were added in 1863. Beyond the gatehouse is an open courtyard, on the right of which is Saint Mary's Hall and its cellar. Facing the gatehouse is a scullery on the ground floor and above it, a gallery, leading to Saint Mary's Hall. Beyond this is the kitchen, possibly the oldest part of the Hall and part of an earlier building. Opposite the great hall is a staircase, leading to the gallery and over it a room once used by the drapers' company as a chapel.

At the back of Saint Mary's Hall, beneath the minstrels' gallery, are two small meeting rooms which are known as "the Prince's chamber" and the "old Council Chamber" and over these are rooms where the city's armour still hangs in the minstrels' gallery. Adjoining Saint Mary's Hall, at the back of the building, is the stone tower called "Caesar's Tower" which was bombed during the war but carefully restored. On the first floor is the treasury where all the city's valuables were kept. Above this room is a small turret room known as "Mary, Queen of Scot's room" where she may have been kept as a prisoner in 1569. We hold a letter in our archives from Queen Elizabeth 1 instructing her advisors to ‘bring the Scottyshe Queene to that our towne of Coventrie and there to see hir safely kept and garded’. A copy of this can be viewed in the Guildhall.

The tapestry that hangs in the Guildhall was made between 1505 and 1515. The central couple it depicts are thought to be Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou. It also shows King Henry VII and Queen Elizabeth, kneeling in prayer when they became members of the guild in 1500. Other important visitors to the hall have included Princess Elizabeth, the daughter of King James I, who was brought to Coventry for safety after the Gunpowder Plot, and dined in the Guildhall in 1605.

St Mary’s Hall was a popular venue for groups of travelling players, including the company of William Shakespeare. According to research in ‘Shakespeare the Player’ by John Southworth, Shakespeare’s first appearance in Coventry was most likely 1580, when he was a sixteen-year-old apprentice to the Worcester’s Men. He then performed at the Hall during his professional career with the Admiral’s Men from 1586, the Chamberlain’s Men from 1594, and the King’s Men from 1603. His last visit to Coventry was in 1614, two years before his death at age 52. A carving of a bearded man opposite the Guildhall entrance, directly to the left of the South Porch window of the Old Cathedral, is believed to be a tribute to the bard.



Image Credit: [Historic Coventry](https://www.historiccoventry.co.uk/tour/content.php?pg=guildhall)

Since the early modern period, the hall has acted as a dancing room, a court, a soup kitchen, and a museum. It has recently reopened after two years of renovations from 2020-2022 and is now available for public tours.

**Archival Material**

BA/H/17/A79/33 - Letter from Queen Elizabeth I to the Mayor of Coventry regarding the care and imprisonment of Mary, Queen of Scots, 1569

BA/N/18/2 - Design for Tapestry at St Mary’s Hall

CCA/3/1/3822 - File relating to dating of 13th century chest in the Treasury at St Mary's Hall

CCA/3/1/7711 - File relating to ten photographs of British monarch oil paintings "from St Mary's Hall" and "now stored at Willoughby House", and two photographs of St Mary's Hall walls: all twelve stamped City Engineer's Office, Coventry, 26 Jun 1942

CCA/3/1/8901 - File relating to scroll made especially to commemorate the rebuilding of Caesar's Tower at St Mary's Hall, which was destroyed by the wartime bombing: scroll sealed in a wall of the Tower, 12 Jul 1949

CCA/TC/6/8 - St Mary’s Hall: Tapestry

CCB/1/2/1 - Typed extracts from the minutes of the Estates and Parliamentary Committee and the General Purposes Committee relating to archives and the City Record Office, including building of a muniment room in St Mary's Hall; publication of the Victoria County History and the St Mary's Hall Guide

CCB/1/14/323 - Correspondence with Lady Antonia Fraser regarding her request for information for her biography of Mary Queen of Scots about the imprisonment of the Queen in St. Mary's Hall, 1968

PA1/6/68 - Transcription of extracts from account of St Mary's Hall tapestry by George Scharf

PA71/1 - "Illustrations of the History of Coventry" by Thomas Sharp, with newspaper articles, illustrations and receipts bound with the volume on separate folios attached to pages of the text, and a deed, c1250, sewn into the volume (folios 149 – 159: illustrations and plans of St Mary’s Hall)

**Reading Room Books (JN725.1)**

The History of St Mary’s Hall, Coventry, by Raymond G. Holl (Kenilworth: B. J. T Print Services Ltd, 1989)

St Mary’s Hall, Coventry: A Guide to the Building, its History and Contents by Joan C. Lancaster (City of Coventry, 1st ed. 1948, 2nd ed. 1981)

**Pamphlets (JN725.1)**

St Mary’s Hall: Transcript of Notes in the Handwriting of Humphrey Wanley, attached to a letter to Lord Harley, dated May 16, 1719

A Guide to St Mary’s Hall, Coventry, With a Description of its Various Antiquities and Recent Improvements, 1826

Memorials of St Mary’s Hall, Coventry, by W. Fretton, 1891

City of Coventry, St Mary’s Hall Restoration, 1913

City of Coventry, St Mary’s Hall, Unveiling of the New Windows Preserved to the City by William Coker Iliffe Esq., 1930

Official Guide to St Mary’s Hall by Joan Cadogan Lancaster, 1948

Caesar’s Tower (notes on the history, 1948)

A Visitors’ Tour Route for St Mary’s Hall, 1978

St Mary’s Hall, Coventry – the Recent Excavations, by Alderman Andrews

The Guild Hall of St Mary – Leaflets