

The Moot Hall, Appleby-in-Westmorland

Appleby's Moot Hall is a building with a fascinating history, which was expertly explained by Marion Barter for our first talk of the 2019/20 season. Marion Barter Associates and Greenlane Archaeology were responsible for undertaking an investigation of the building in 2018 on behalf of Historic England. The work was undertaken in order to help determine the history and significance of the building and to inform future management. This involved a study of available documentary evidence and a detailed examination of the building.

As a starting point Marion explained that a 1596 datestone had been recorded by the RCHME during their visit to Appleby in 1934, although this was noted to be re-set (the stone is unfortunately no longer legible). The earliest documentary reference to The Moot Hall is in the Chamberlains Accounts of 1610. The listing description states the hall was re-built in 1769 but Marion noted that the evidence on which this was based is missing. The earliest photographs of the building show a stone staircase (removed 1880s) and other structures.



Photo courtesy of Appleby-in-Westmorland Society

So, when was The Moot Hall first built and how did it develop as a building over time?

Marion began by examining the building's structure which can reveal information not recorded in documentary sources. The roof often contains some of the earliest fabric in a building and was not subject to changing fashions. Inside the roof of The Moot Hall (which is not easily accessed) Marion noted that the south gable end contained an earlier roof line, the whole roof having been raised by 1m at some point in the past. The earlier roof was steeper, which may indicate the building was original thatched and open, as it had also been treated internally with limewash. Examination of the roof trusses also revealed assembly marks and further evidence that the roof had been re-assembled. Historic England also funded dendrochronological dating (tree-ring dating) of the roof timbers which produced a felling date of 1570-1596, supporting the recorded date stone for the building! The north gable end (above the Mayor's Parlour) showed a former doorway and blocked window.



The main council chamber holds several mysteries, including a gallery which is now closed off and hard to access. There are no records to explain its presence. The posts supporting it are 18th or 19th century in date, but the council chamber also contained 17th century panelling which may be reset. Having analysed the evidence Marion has suggested that in the 17th century the floor of the council chamber was added to create a two-story building creating a grand upper chamber which still houses impressive 17th century sash windows.



In the 18th century parts of the building, including the ground floor, were let out to businesses. There are references to shops 'under the hall' or 'under the stairs'. It is known that the north end of the building was added in c.1800 as it is recorded in the town council minutes. This may have been to create more space for accommodation and to house the weights and measures room. The Moot Hall had an important role in managing Appleby's market and maintaining standards. This included ringing a bell to signify the commencement of trading (the bell setting can still be seen at the south end of the building). Repairs and maintenance of the building are recorded in the town council minutes and there were also heated discussions about demolishing the building, which thankfully never came to fruition!

The north end of the building was remodelled in c.1933 when the windows were replaced to match those of the council chamber, the north porch added, and the current south staircase was built. There are now plans to redesign the building to make it more accessible to the public and to introduce an exhibition space, whilst maintaining the most significant and historic parts of the building. It is clear that the story of The Moot Hall is not yet over, and the proposed works may reveal still more secrets about its colourful past.

The full report on The Moot Hall can be downloaded from Historic England's website: <https://research.historicengland.org.uk/> Just search for 'The Moot Hall'.

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Historic England

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An Investigation and Assessment of Significance

Marion Barter and Dan Elsworth

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