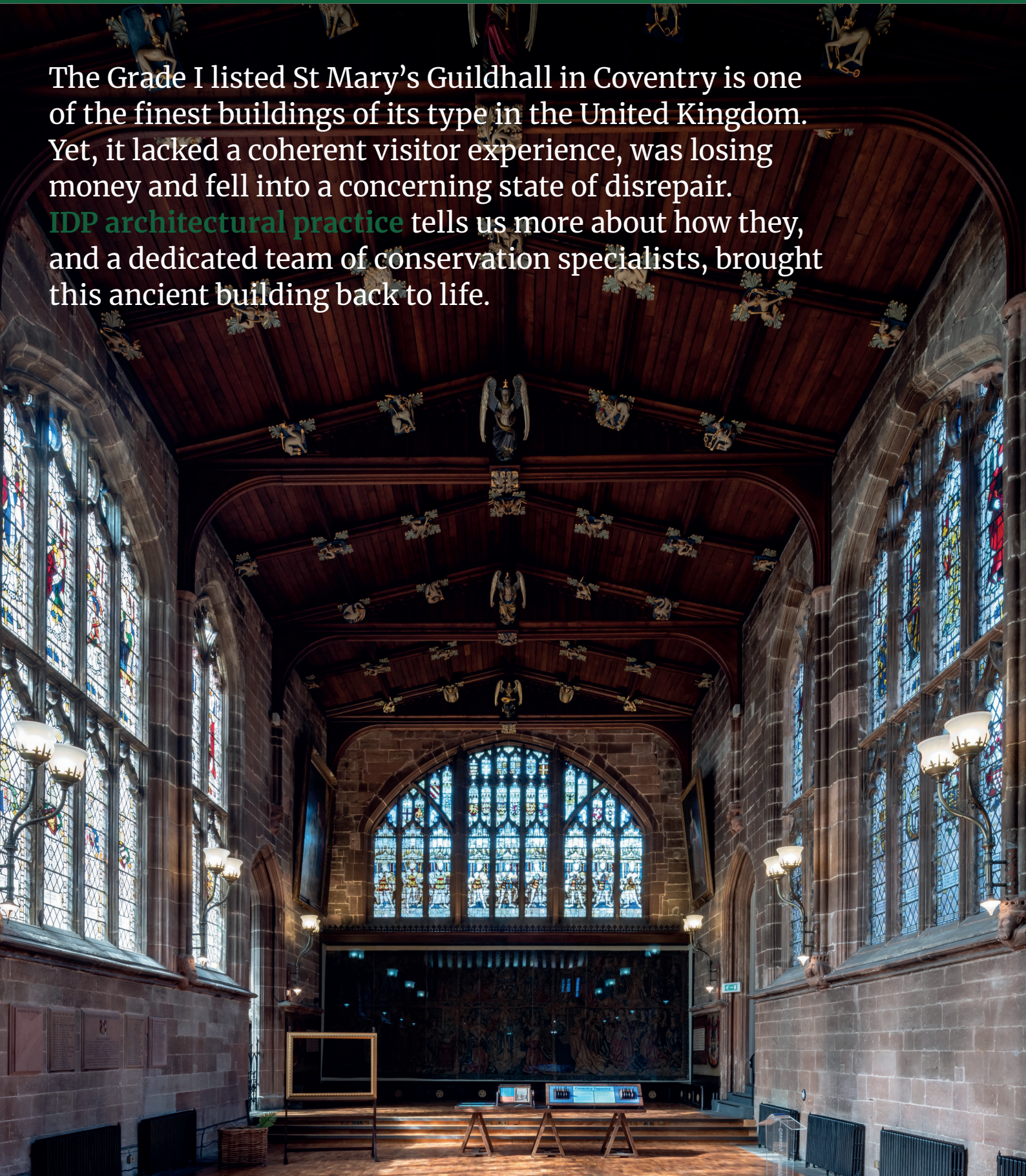


St Mary's Guildhall, Coventry – 700 years of history brought back to life

The Grade I listed St Mary's Guildhall in Coventry is one of the finest buildings of its type in the United Kingdom. Yet, it lacked a coherent visitor experience, was losing money and fell into a concerning state of disrepair. **IDP architectural practice** tells us more about how they, and a dedicated team of conservation specialists, brought this ancient building back to life.



The brief was clear; to restore a beautiful and commercially viable venue that could be used for a wide range of events and to increase visitor numbers by improving the visitor experience. The first step was to establish a team of specialists in historical and cultural conservation and restoration projects. Once done, a feasibility study was commissioned to understand how the historically significant building could be sympathetically restored and transformed into a unique, inspirational and educational destination and venue offering spaces for events and meetings for up to 150 guests.

A condition survey and conservation statement followed which looked at the condition and historical importance of external and interior features such as ceilings, windows, floors, fireplaces and rainwater pipes. A heritage report informed the team on many aspects of the site including architectural development over time, constructional materials, areas of significance and aspects of the building that had a detrimental effect on the historic asset. The conclusions drawn raised alarming concerns for the future and preservation of the building. Furthermore, market research was carried out to understand how the local community might use the venue, while forecasting helped identify the building's financial and business potential going forward. Funding of c£5.6m was secured, including a £1.8m award from the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

RESTORATION AND PRESERVATION

Although the objective was to create a financially viable venue, this was not to be at the expense of conserving the historical property. Historic England, who offered a wealth of knowledge, including cutting-edge science, expertise in training, conservation advice and access to resources, challenged the project where necessary to ensure the restoration was being carried out sympathetically. Consequently, each space was sensitively restored and preserved, reusing materials when possible or drawing on historic and sustainable materials such as oak and lime.

Where appropriate, modern insulation materials were used to retain energy in the different spaces. Underfloor heating, supplied by Coventry's district heating infrastructure, was installed with breathable materials to avoid problems of condensation, such as a floor made of recycled blown glass. This resulted in some conservation gains such as the removal of modern wall-hung radiators. Repair works to windows, doors and walls will limit energy loss and help reduce ongoing running costs. Although wifi and new electrical systems have been installed throughout, copper cables have been used to maintain the look and feel of the property.



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ACCESSIBILITY AND CONSERVATION

Accessibility throughout the venue was a key priority, to ensure that both able bodied people and wheelchair users can enjoy the best this medieval property has to offer. Hence, the original historic courtyard floor was lifted and re-laid, providing level access to other parts of the building including the cloister, kitchen and undercroft. Stone masonry repairs were carried out and the walls were repointed. New doors for the cloister were sensitively designed which improved accessibility and make an inviting and grand entrance into the venue. In addition, a timber ramp and a lift have been sympathetically installed to provide easy access to the Great Hall.

Added to the original building in 1894, the muniment room was the old archive space for the local authority, but it was unused because it was cold and difficult to access. A previously sealed door was opened up and a new wheelchair-accessible

ABOVE: St Mary's Guildhall, Coventry. An iconic medieval building that continues to be an important community venue today. (All images by Paul Miller www.millerphotography.co.uk)

LEFT: The historic Great Hall. Queen Elizabeth I dined in this space while in 1847 Frederick Douglass gave a public address to raise money and support to end slavery.



ABOVE: The new spiral staircase in the Great Hall allows greater access to the Minstrel Gallery.

RIGHT: The medieval kitchen can now be seen by visitors for the first time in over a century. In recent years the ancient kitchen has been hidden by a working commercial kitchen.

door was installed. Now the stone vaulted ceilings have been restored and lighting, heating and decoration have upgraded this space, so it can facilitate small events and ceremonies.

St Mary's has one of the few medieval kitchens remaining in the United Kingdom, however since the 1960s it has been hidden behind period kitchen units. Once stripped of units, the first floor and ceiling were removed to expose original features. A careful balance had to be struck between conserving the walls and not doing too much restoration, although underfloor heating was installed and a new York stone floor was laid to replace the original missing floor.

The Great Hall features two highly significant medieval features; the famous 500-year-old Coventry tapestry, woven for the Guildhall in Flanders between 1505 and 1515, and a late-15th century stained-glass window depicting actual or legendary rulers of England. The tapestry was



conserved and is now displayed in its original position in a new casing beneath the stained glass window. The delicate textile has been supported onto a tilted platform to distribute its weight evenly rather than being hung on the top edge. A new timber spiral staircase has been installed to connect the Great Hall with the Minstrel Gallery which will allow more people to visit the Armoury on the first floor and to view the medieval tapestry. The effect of sound on the medieval glass is monitored when the room is in use to ensure there is no detrimental impact.

Other aspects of the project include the removal of a 1970s carpet from the Council House in order to expose the 19th century floor underneath, which has been restored. Offices and suites, along with the necessary facilities, have been upgraded, providing contemporary spaces for meetings and conferences. For ease of access, the Mercer's room, now used for school visits, is accessed from the main entrance through a restored medieval door, complete with its original medieval key. The carpet was removed revealing a handsome herringbone floor which has been restored and conserved along with wall paintings and stained glass artwork.

Outside, the roofs of the Great Hall and cloister were in poor condition and have been replaced with new copper and lead coatings respectively. Repairs were made to the stonework in the façade which was in danger of falling. Research was carried out on batches of stone to make sure that it was compatible with the existing stonework.



LEFT: The medieval kitchen now has a link bridge at a high level.

RIGHT: The Muniment Room is now the first room on the visitor journey and introduces the timeline of the Guildhall and its importance to Coventry's history.

BELOW: A lift from the courtyard to the restaurant located in the undercroft.



Thanks to the investment made, St Mary's Guildhall, a once part-time visitor attraction, is now open seven days a week throughout the year.

Local people are proud of the heritage of their city. The project has been developed as part of a new Cathedral Cultural Quarter, which is designed to grow regional tourism and reposition St Mary's Guildhall as a key heritage and cultural asset. This incredible transformation was made possible with funds received from Coventry City Council, Arts Council England, The National Lottery Heritage Fund, CWLEP, Midlands Engine and West Midlands Combined Authority.

For more information see
<https://www.weareidp.com/>
<https://www.stmarysguildhall.co.uk/>

The niches underneath the stained glass window were heavily worn. The whole elevation has been repaired, and just one of the niches has been fully restored as 'a letter to the future' in case it is decided later that all the niches also need attention.

READY FOR THE FUTURE

Thanks to the investment made, St Mary's Guildhall, a once part-time visitor attraction, is now open seven days a week throughout the year. The building and collections are now sound and the interior boasts a more engaging visitor experience which includes augmented and virtual reality digital tours. The building continues to play an important role in civic life, hosting regular civic functions, including the inauguration of the mayor each year, as well as operating as a venue for private and corporate events. There is a new audience development and outreach programme targeting under-represented groups, creating spaces and resources that are accessible for learning and families, and an exciting activities and events programme.

