

Heritage champion resigns from Borough Council as historic Guildhall's fate remains uncertain and shrouded in secrecy.

The fate of England's largest and oldest medieval Guildhall, St George's Guildhall in King's Lynn, hangs in the balance following the resignation of Cllr Avril Wright. Cllr Wright was the "Heritage Champion" for the Borough Council of King's Lynn and West Norfolk (BCKLWN) and Chair of their Informal Working Group (IWG) that was looking into the future of St George's Guildhall. Cllr Wright resigned in May and the Borough Council has remained characteristically tight-lipped about the circumstances of her resignation or what this might mean for the future development of the Guildhall. And despite encouragement and repeated requests from MP Sir Henry Bellingham, senior council leaders and officials continue to refuse to discuss the future of the Guildhall with community representatives.

The Guildhall was built in 1410 and has been used as a theatre since 1422 – its main use to this day – making it the oldest theatre in Europe. It is the only surviving theatre in the world where Shakespeare is known to have performed. Since 1951, it has been owned by the National Trust and has been leased and used as an arts centre ever since. BCKLWN is the current tenant of the NT, with a fully-repairing lease that continues until 2050.

The latest problems arose in 2014, when the King's Lynn Art Centre Trust (KLACT) was running the Guildhall as an arts centre on behalf of the BCKLWN, supported by £30k per year of funding from the council. With growing doubts over the future of the Arts Centre, Focus-Consultants were commissioned to produce a Masterplan "to determine the most effective way to develop their site and deliver a high-quality Arts Centre offer for King's Lynn". Despite the report running to over 200 pages, costing over £30k to produce and offering many recommendations, none of the proposals were agreed and the report was shelved. Instead, in December 2015, the BCKLWN gave notice that they would be withdrawing their £30k per annum funding to KLACT. With no way of meeting their ongoing costs, the Trustees of KLACT were left with no option but to announce their immediate closure, forcing the redundancies of the Director and all staff and leading to the mothballing of the Guildhall's galleries and significantly reducing the usage of the theatre.

It has never been entirely clear why the BCKLWN made the decision to close down KLACT without having a clear plan in place, but there were several conflicting interests. These included disagreement among the Trustees regarding the future use of some of the facilities on the site. Meanwhile the BCKLWN was planning to level the raked floor in the theatre auditorium and use the space as a wedding venue.

A long period of silence followed, with no word from the BCKLWN, creating anxiety amongst various community arts organisations who were users of the Guildhall as a hall for hire. By September 2016, faced by a wall of silence from BCKLWN, a public meeting was called to discuss the Guildhall's future to which the council was invited. From this, a new group emerged – Lynn Art, Culture and Heritage (LArCH) – comprising experienced and credible leaders of local arts, heritage and business organisations. LArCH's objectives were to seek to work together with the Borough Council to find the best outcome for the Guildhall.

By December 2016, oblivious to the appeals from LArCH for consultation and the creation of an ambitious, coherent plan for the Guildhall complex, BCKLWN went ahead with a hurried bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). Unsurprisingly, the HLF turned down the bid. In the HLF's decision notice letter, the reasons given included, "... the separate functions proposed did not appear to represent a coherent package with a clear identity. The bid provided insufficient evidence of a

rethink and fresh approach. . . sustainability was considered high risk and the case for investment in this scheme was unconvincing. . .”

In May 2017, following the HLF rejection, a small group of representatives from LArCH met Cllr Elizabeth Nockolds, Deputy Leader of the Borough Council and portfolio holder for Culture & Heritage, to appeal to the Council to allow LArCH to work more collaboratively with the Council on a revised plan. It was made very clear during that meeting that this was not going to happen and that the Council would be discussing the future of the Guildhall only with their professional consultants.

Another long period of silence followed while BCKLWN, according to Cllr Nockolds, at the end of September 2017, were “*. . . at the moment working on a cultural positioning statement to help align our future plans with the strategies of the relevant organisations . . . who we are likely to be approaching for funding. This should help us put any proposals for the Guildhall into a more strategic context.*”

The National Trust are not blameless in this sorry saga. Instead of pro-actively working with their tenant, BCKLWN, and offering their expertise to help find a viable solution, they have been content to watch the council continue to flounder while their building deteriorates. It has been known for over 10 years that the Guildhall is in desperate need of a new roof to protect the 15th century timber beams that hold it up. Recent photographs show neglect to the external brickwork and windows and flaking plaster and mould growing on the interior walls. From a cosmetic perspective, the seats in the auditorium are literally falling apart – in a recent performance an audience member handed a steward the arm of his seat – and much of the upholstery is patched with coloured sticky tape. Correspondence with the Trustees of the National Trust confirmed that the NT were not prepared to get involved and a question that was submitted to the NT for inclusion in their AGM in October was omitted from the meeting. A subsequent letter from Paul Boniface, Secretary of the NT, confirmed their lack of interest, by saying, “It was unfortunate that the latest application for a . . . HLF grant . . . was unsuccessful. However, the National Trust is confident that the Council is working on a new scheme to secure the future of the building.”

In January 2018, at a meeting of the BCKLWN at which the public and press was excluded, an Informal Working Group was set up, with Cllr Wright in the Chair, to explore options for the Guildhall. A number of representatives were invited to “talk to” the IWG to share their ideas. This turned out to be a one-way affair, in which the invitee was allowed to speak for 10 or 15 minutes to an assortment of councillors and council officials, without any questions, comments or feedback being given. In addition, thousands of words of correspondence were sent to the IWG in supporting evidence. The IWG fed back its findings and recommendations to a meeting of BCKLWN in April, at which the public and press were excluded. Despite several attempts to obtain feedback from the IWG there has been no dialogue with any of those who gave evidence, including LArCH who had formally requested that they be allowed to contribute to the discussion.

A press release issued after the April council meeting was typically vague but included “The addition of a small cinema . . . would attract a range of arthouse and foreign language films as well as more mainstream productions.” Rather ironically, of all the arts, cinema is perhaps one of the best catered for in King’s Lynn. The town centre is currently served by a vibrant independent 3-screen cinema, itself housed in a significant historic building, that shows mainstream releases and live screenings, as well as a Community Cinema Club that shows films at the Guildhall. The cinema club screens less well-known films, arthouse and foreign language films and is currently the single biggest user of the Guildhall, accounting for one third of all bookings. No discussion or consideration has been had with these two organisations in putting together plans for new cinema.

Despite several attempts to create a dialogue with the council and to establish a two-way discussion about the Guildhall's future, BCKLWN have steadfastly refused to do this or to provide any details as to what they are planning to do with the Guildhall complex. Following the April meeting, the local MP, Sir Henry Bellingham was brought in to try to persuade the BCKLWN to commence a dialogue with LArCH. In an email to Ivor Rowlands in April, he wrote that he had, "... been in touch with (Cllr) Elizabeth Nockolds, (Cllr) Avril Wright, (Cllr) Peter Gidney (Chair of the council's Regeneration Panel) and Chris Bamfield (Executive Director). I have strongly recommended that they agree to meet up with you in the near future to talk all of this through." Eventually, a meeting took place with Cllr Gidney in which it was made clear that he was powerless to act in the face of a Cabinet run Council (of which he is not a member) and he was not at liberty to disclose any of the details or recommendations of the IWG. He subsequently wrote in an email, "I will have something to report back - but not yet. You have to be a bit patient at the moment, - I do understand you have been waiting for two years." Subsequent attempts to speak to Ray Harding, Chief Executive of BCKLWN, by telephone have been expertly fielded by his secretary, explaining that he is either in meetings or not available for any conversation or meeting about the Guildhall.

Both Ray Harding and Chris Bamfield are known to be winding-down their commitment to their jobs by reducing the numbers of day a week that they work, as they are they each preparing for retirement. The provision of art, culture and heritage facilities is a non-statutory activity for the Council. This has led to speculation that neither of them has any real interest in the future of the Guildhall and are simply not concerned about what may happened to it.

A further irony is that the other major user of the Guildhall, King's Lynn Festival, owes its very existence to the Guildhall and to its founder, Lady Ruth Fermoy. Her close friend, Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, was the festival's patron from its foundation in 1951 until her death in 2002. These two great ladies and supporters of the Guildhall are each great grandmother to Princes William and Harry – Lady Fermoy's daughter, Francis, was Diana Spencer's Mother and the Queen Mother was mother of Queen Elizabeth. How they would turn in their graves if they could see what is happening today.

Ends.

Further details, including copies of documents, photographs and correspondence, are available on request from ivorrowlands09@gmail.com or by phoning Ivor Rowlands on 07824 306404.

About the author:

Ivor Rowlands has worked in the fast-moving consumer goods industry for over 30 years, and at senior executive or boardroom level for the past 20. He is a director of a small, privately owned, £36m turnover company in North Norfolk. His specialism is in sales and marketing.

He has been a long-standing advocate for King's Lynn ever since he moved with his wife from Manchester to work there 27 years ago. His two children were both born and grew up in Lynn. He is involved in several Community based organisations and has become associated with many experienced people with a huge collective knowledge of Art, Culture and Heritage and of the recent history of St George's Guildhall and the King's Lynn Arts Centre. It is through these connections that he has developed his thoughts and enthusiasm about the Guildhall.

About St George's Guildhall

St. George's Guildhall in King's Lynn is the largest and oldest guildhall in England. For over 600 years it has been adapted and developed to meet the changing needs of life in the town.

For the greater part of its existence, St George's Guildhall has been a theatre and a place for public entertainment. It was used for plays by the medieval Guilds of Lynn. The first known theatrical production was of a Nativity Play performed before a feast in 1442. This nearly 600 year history of use as a theatre makes St George's Guildhall the oldest theatre in England.

Recent academic research has verified that Shakespeare performed in St. George's Guildhall in 1593 when the Lord Admiral's Men were visiting Norfolk. The Guildhall is the World's only surviving theatre where Shakespeare is known to have performed.

The Guild of St George was founded in Lynn in 1376, when the town was one of the most prosperous in England. Lynn had 70 medieval guilds that collectively owned vast wealth and played a powerful and influential role in the town.

In 1406, the Guild of St. George acquired land, reclaimed from the Great Ouse, to build its new hall, 107ft long and 29ft wide. It was built between 1410-1420, on two levels with an undercroft venturing into the Ouse to allow boats to moor inside the building and a great hall above that was used for meetings of the Guilds.

By about 1500 it was necessary for five buttresses to be erected against the north wall due to the magnificent roof of trussed rafters being too heavy for the supporting walls. These buttresses are still to be seen outside the Guildhall. The roof is still the original and the rafters can be seen inside the auditorium.

In medieval times, the Guildhall was primarily used for meetings, dinners and dances until in 1547, King Edward VI dissolved the Guilds of England.

Reflecting the growth and prosperity of the merchant class in Lynn, in 1560 a local merchant, John Dynnesdale, bought the out-buildings for use as warehouses and the Guildhall itself became known as the Common Town Hall.

Medieval Lynn was a cosmopolitan town with strong trading links with the Hanseatic League in Northern Europe and with Spain and Portugal to the South, and past owners of the Guildhall reflect this. In late 1660s it was purchased by the Rotterdam merchant Hubert Vinckesteyn who rebuilt the rear range. Later, the Guildhall was in the possession of Hubert van Vlieden.

Following the Restoration of Charles II in 1660, various performing troupes from Norwich leased the Guildhall from the Corporation during the February Mart.

During the Civil War of the 1640's, Royalists stored barrels of gunpowder and arms in the Guildhall. And in 1704 there was an unsuccessful attempt by the Corporation to open a button factory. The Guildhall was also home to the County Court until 1767. It had been leased to Joseph Cooper, a painter, at a peppercorn rent for 21 years in 1727 on the condition that he attended to the painting, woodwork, plastering and even gilding.

By 1766, the Mayor found it worthwhile to commission Thomas Sharpe to build a playhouse inside the Guildhall for £450. A model of this theatre was constructed in 1950 and is still kept in the building today.

The success of the Guildhall as a playhouse led to a modern theatre being built in St. James Street and the Guildhall reverted to use as a warehouse when it was sold to William Lee Warner for

£557.10.0d in 1814. When his estate was bought by the Lynn merchant family of Everard in 1826, the Guildhall became a wool warehouse.

The Everards, in turn sold St. George's Guildhall to G. M. Bridges & Son Ltd., scenic artists (for £2,650) who in 1920 were already leasing the premises. Bridges was awarded a Royal Warrant for supplying scenery to the Royal Family at nearby Sandringham, and the crest still hangs in the theatre today. However, the impact of Cinema took away much of the firm's work, and by 1945 the Guildhall was not only derelict but in danger of being demolished for the expansion of a nearby garage.

It was saved by Alexander Penrose, who bought the building in 1951 and gave it to the National Trust who, in turn, leased it to the St George's Art Trust for 99 years until 2050. The input of the Pilgrim Trust, Arts Council and a public subscription led to the Guildhall's conversion to an Arts Centre and theatre. Queen Elizabeth (the late Queen Mother) opened the venue in July 1951 and launched the King's Lynn Festival, which has been held every July since then. The Arts Centre Galleries, which were opened in 1963, were converted by the late Lady Fermoy (lady in waiting to the late Queen Mother) as a memorial to her husband, Lord Fermoy, and indeed until recently, the Arts Centre was known as the Fermoy Centre.

In 1992, the Arts Centre had run into difficulties and the Borough Council stepped in to save the National Trust from losing its tenant by taking over the lease. In 1997 the Borough Council took responsibility for the programming and operation of the Arts Centre and in 2011 this was taken over by the King's Lynn Arts Centre Trust. Sadly, the Trust closed in December 2015 and the buildings remain under-used, neglected and in need of modernisation and refurbishment. Neither the Borough Council (tenant) nor the National Trust (owner) has been able to come up with a viable plan to secure the future of St George's Guildhall.