

6 Midsomer Norton Audio Trail - The Town Hall

[Ambient sound: Victorian market, background chatter, brass band, crowd cheering, running water, modern construction sounds, builder whistling]

You could hardly miss the striking building in prime position at the head of the High Street, with its arched windows and decorative stone. Our Town Hall is built in the Italianate style, a popular architectural choice in the 1800s. Queen Victoria and Prince Albert loved this style and had their beloved holiday home, Osborne House on the Isle of Wight, built in it on a vast scale.

Originally, the building wasn't designed as a town hall, but as a market hall, completed in 1860. Thomas Harris Smith, a brewer and businessman, raised a fund to build it to serve the thriving town. Corn markets were held monthly, and cattle were also auctioned at different times of the year...

Voice 1: Cattle auction this way!

Voice 2: Sold to the man in the top hat!

Voice 3: Fresh meat, fresh meat, come get your fresh meat!

Voice 4: A sack of potatoes please

Voice 5: Come on, look over there

Voice 6: George we need three pounds of beef!

The market would have been at the heart of the town's social and economic life – full of noise, gossip, and bustling people, the air thick with the aroma of fresh meat and produce. On the first floor there was, and still is, an impressive public assembly room – if the building is open, go and take a look.

In the 1880s, the hall came into the hands of William Beauchamp, who was from one of Midsomer Norton's mine-owning families. When William died, the Urban District Council leased the building, and its transformation into the Town Hall began. Inside, the assembly room remained untouched, but all sorts of alterations were made on the ground floor, creating a maze of staircases, narrow corridors, and little rooms. No longer a market, it became a different kind of community space which housed all sorts of activities: Salvation Army, labour exchange, Citizens Advice bureau, council offices, concert hall, quiz night venue and a community cinema. If these walls could talk, they'd tell a thousand tales of the people who have lived, worked and played here.

Later, the hall came under the management of the Sarah Ann Trust. The charity borrowed its name from a young girl who used to fetch water from the stream to quench the

thirst of the stonemasons building the hall. Look out for the carvings of a head and a water pitcher on either side of the main entrance, thought to commemorate Sarah Ann. Other interesting details can be seen round the corner of the building facing into The Island. Look up at the balcony above the door, from where the Coronations of Edward VII in 1902, and George V in 1911, were announced

Voices: God save King George!

Surrounding the door are two columns, each with a carved horned head – these act as hidden reminders of the cattle auctions once held here. There are also two carvings of birds, though their meaning is a bit of a mystery – what do you think they could symbolise?

Today, the Town Hall faces another transformation which will turn it back into a market hall. The vanished sights, smells and sounds of those lively markets 150 years ago will once again return to the heart of Midsomer Norton.