



Chapter 1 - The History of the Guild & Its Buildings

The Guild of the Holy Cross

The Guild of the Holy Cross dates to at least the 13th century, almost 800 years ago.



It was a social and religious organisation for people who wanted to build a community around the basic daily business of almsgiving and prayer. The Guild helped its members to network, strike business deals, and even (so it was claimed) get into heaven faster.

Both men and women could become Guild members by paying a small fee. Membership fees ranged from 20d (pence) to 20s shillings (1 pound), and when a member died, the guild arranged a solemn procession, a requiem mass, a burial and feast.

Bearing in mind that a craftsman's cottage's rent might be 20 shillings for the whole year, full membership was a potentially significant expense. Joining was a good idea if you wanted to meet influential people and widen your network of contacts. Most members were prosperous local tradesmen, craftsmen and their families. But local clergy, gentry and even nobility joined too. Some members came from other places like Coventry, London and Bristol.



Prominent Guild figures are portrayed in the Guild Chapel's stained-glass window as shown right - Thomas Jolyffe, Sir Hugh Clopton, Robert de Stratford, King Edward VI and John Shakespeare.

The Guild provided 'social services' in medieval Stratford. It helped its members when they were ill, and supported their families if they died. It also gave 'alms' (charity) to poor and vulnerable local people, building a range of almshouses (sheltered accommodation) next to the Guildhall in about 1500. It also looked after local infrastructure like bridges, and founded the first school in Stratford. In 1295 it appointed a schoolmaster called Richard as 'rector scholarum' to teach

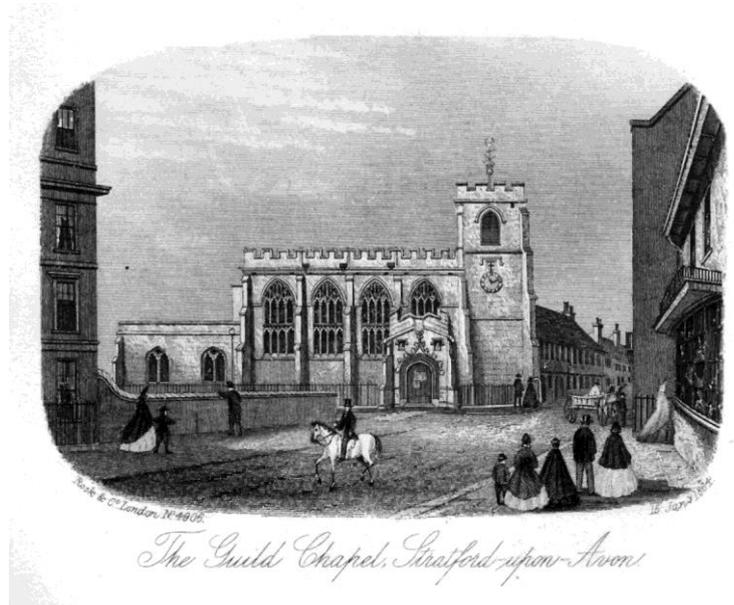
members' sons Latin, music and the principles of Christian faith. This was the predecessor of King Edward VI School (K.E.S.), which still uses the site today.

Over time the Guild became wealthy and powerful. But this wealth and power was its undoing. King Edward VI suppressed all the guilds in the kingdom in 1547, and confiscated their property.

In Stratford it was the end of an era.

The Guild was abolished, but the king still needed people he could trust to run Stratford from day to day. So, in 1553 he used a Royal Charter of Incorporation to create Stratford Borough Council. The town corporation was granted ownership of the Holy Cross Chapel and became responsible for caring for the almshouse poor, and for paying and housing the vicar and his assistant chaplain, as well as the schoolmaster.

Many changes have occurred within the council in the intervening years and since 2001, Stratford Town Trust has owned and cared for the Chapel. The Town Trust is a grant-giving charity, independent from any council. It uses the income from the Guild and College Estates to fund good works in the town and to support the community.



The Guild Chapel

In 1269, the Guild requested (and was granted) a licence from the Bishop of Worcester to build a Chapel and Hospital for the poor priests in the diocese on the site of the current Guild Chapel. Whilst the fabric of the east and south walls of the Chancel may partially be of the 13th century, this part of the chapel was remodelled over the years and at least the north wall was rebuilt around 1450. Records show that proctors from Stratford-upon-Avon made the long journey to Rome to obtain a Papal Bull to allow the Divine service to be held there in 1424/5. Two years later, a new altar stone of alabaster replaced a temporary altar within the Chapel. In 1449/50, rafters and scaffolding were purchased to build a new Chancel, and in 1451/2 further bequests of money were made to furnish the new structure. We are not sure when the Hospital ceased to exist but know that the Nave, Porch and Tower you see today were added around the 1490s with funding from Hugh Clopton, a wealthy local merchant.

The Friends of the Guild Chapel

By the middle of the 20th century the Chapel had fallen into considerable disrepair. The Friends of the Guild Chapel was formed in 1954 and over the next thirty years the Friends undertook significant repairs and alterations to both the interior and exterior of the building, financed initially by money raised by the Friends, and latterly the Town Council and now Town Trust.

Other Guild Buildings

As well as the Chapel, two other important Guild buildings survive today:

The Guildhall & Schoolhouse

The Guildhall pre-dates the Chapel, and was constructed between 1418 and 1420. It was the Guild's headquarters. The house next to the Guildhall was built in 1427. This was the Guild's original schoolhouse. A teacher called a 'grammar priest' taught the sons of Guild members on the ground floor, and lived in a room upstairs. Over about a hundred years more buildings were added, including the Chapel and Almshouses. By around 1530 the Guildhall was the most impressive complex of buildings in Stratford. In 1553 the Guildhall became the



headquarters of Stratford Borough Council. It remained the heart of civic life in Stratford for over 400 years, until 1848.

The King's New School (later known as King Edward VI School) moved into the Guildhall in the 1560s. And in 1571 a seven-year-old boy called William Shakespeare started going to school there. K.E.S. pupils still study in the Guildhall today.

The Almshouses

These were probably built in about 1500. The ground floor rooms were 'sheltered housing' for poor, sick and elderly local people. The rooms on the upper floor were rented out.

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