

The Guesten Hall at Avoncroft Museum

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Author- Simon Carter, Director of Avoncroft Museum

One of the most impressive buildings in the Avoncroft Museum in Stoke Prior is the Guesten Hall. Almost 700 years ago Wulstan de Bransford, the city's Prior, embarked on a major building project in the heart of Worcester in a bid to become Bishop of Worcester. He ordered the construction of the county's grandest entertaining hall for visiting dignitaries or guesten (the Middle English plural for guest).

Wulstan was Prior from 1317 to 1338 and then Bishop from 1338 to 1349. He was ambitious. His decision to build the great hall, a fittingly impressive open space rising 17 metres from ground level to the roof ridge with a span of over ten metres, could be seen as a calculated move to help him obtain the title he desired.

However, the problem was how to create a large open space without the need for supporting pillars, given that the only material available was wood, and trees only reach a finite height. Wide timber roofs required wood to be jointed, resulting in a loss of strength. Additionally, the weight of both the roof cladding and the roof structure would have caused an immense downward thrust. Faced with these challenges, the craftsman engineer had to work out how to spread that weight and thrust to the side walls without causing them to bulge outwards. The development of this skill resulted in the Guesten Hall roof and the great hammerbeam roofs of Westminster Hall and Hampton Court Palace, some of England's finest medieval carpentry masterpieces,

Bishop Wulstan died in the mid 14th century and just under a century later, following the dissolution of the monasteries, the Priory was closed, with the ownership of the Guesten Hall transferring to the Dean of the Cathedral. Subsequently, the roof may have been damaged during the Civil War and by the end of the 17th century, the old and unfashionable building had been divided into smaller service rooms.

By the mid 19th century, Worcester Diocesan Architectural Society, whilst urging the rescue of the hall, stated that it appeared to be beyond repair. As a result, the building was demolished but the roof was saved.

By reducing its width, the roof was reused at the new Holy Trinity Church at Shrub Hill, which was completed in 1865. When the church became redundant and was demolished in 1969, the roof was dismantled and removed to the newly-established Avoncroft Museum of Buildings for restoration and storage. The roof was re-assembled on the ground by an expert carpenter, who returned it to its original span.

Recognising it was a treasure too important to keep from public view, in 1987 work started on the construction of a new Guesten Hall. The foundation stone was laid by Philip Goodrich, Bishop of Worcester and in November 1988, the raising of the eight original oak trusses, together with one new one, was completed.

Since then, the Guesten Hall has been used for many different purposes including concerts, lectures and weddings. Its amazing roof is undoubtedly a sight worth seeing.