

PRIORY HOUSE

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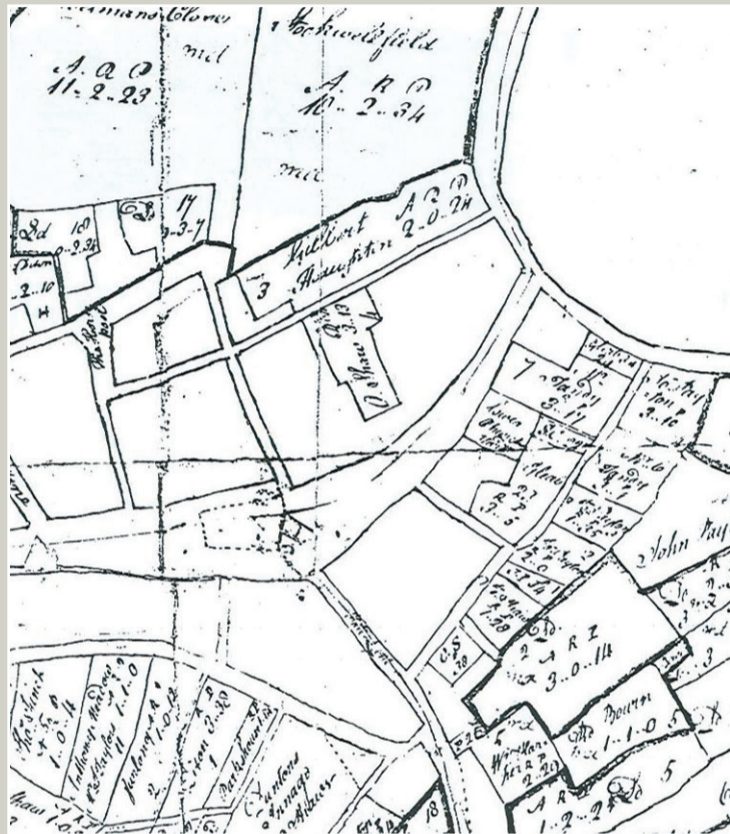
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THE ARCHITECTURE OF PRIORY HOUSE

Priory House dates from the early 19th century. It can be seen in maps of the time and is mentioned in Pigot's Commercial Directory of Worcestershire 1835.

Pigot naturally describes the castle and its history 'now become a charming place of resort for the inhabitants and visitors [sic]'. He mentions the priory and the newly built Priory House: 'a handsome building'. Bentley in 1840 also refers to Priory House whilst describing the Priory ruins: "At a little distance is a tasteful modern erection, though in the antique style, also called the Priory".

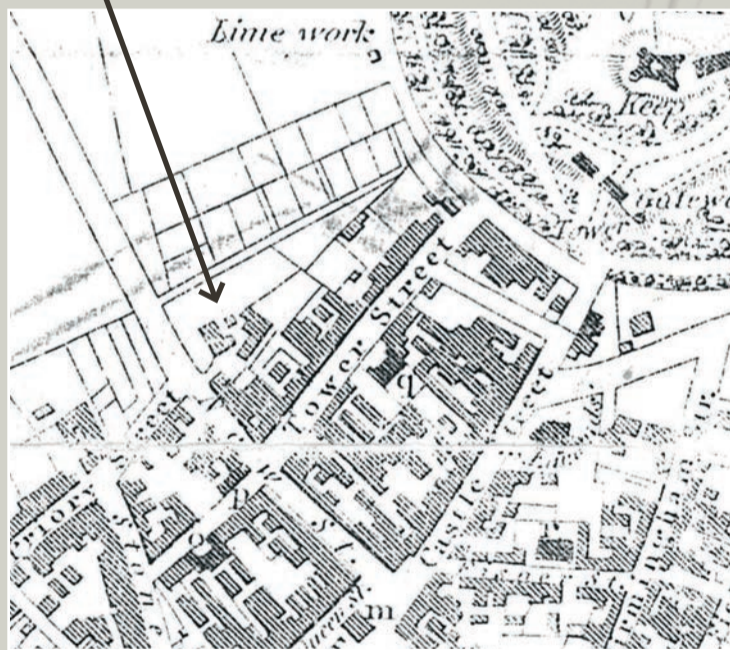


Harry Court's map of 1780: Priory House has not been constructed and only open land is shown.

Unnamed map dating from 1824 shows the building now constructed.



The building is clearly visible on Bentley's 1839 map.



As a consequence of its age (pre 1850) and the fact that the building's original architectural features and interest are largely intact, the building merits particular protection and is included on the National Heritage List for England, listed Grade II. This means that it is recognised as a building of special interest warranting every effort to preserve it. It has been included on the statutory list since 1949.

Front page illustration: Blocksidge Almanac 1914, Courtesy of Dudley Archives and Local History Service.

The stuccoed three-storey building displays many classical features, typical of the late Georgian period. The main building, which dates from the early 19th century, is symmetrical with three windows to the first and second floors. The larger second floor windows feature dripstones on consoles, with the central window being pedimented. The building has a moulded stone cornice below the parapet. An elaborate dentilled cornice adds further interest at second floor with wreathed paterae (circular or oval disc-like ornament, usually rendered in a low relief) on the frieze below. On the ground floor two impressive Venetian windows light the rooms to either side of the main entrance. The main entrance has a convex stone porch on plain columns with channelled frieze.



Moulded stone cornice below parapet.

Dentilled cornice with wreathed paterae on frieze.

Venetian windows.

Convex stone porch on plain columns with channelled frieze.



Internally, the building retains many features of interest. A glass dome in the centre of the building lights the landing at the top of the staircase.



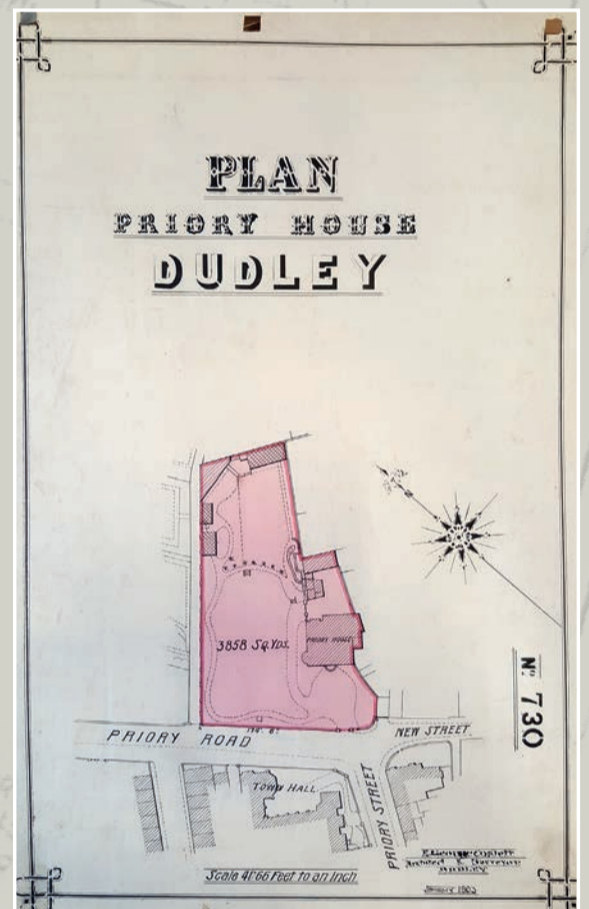
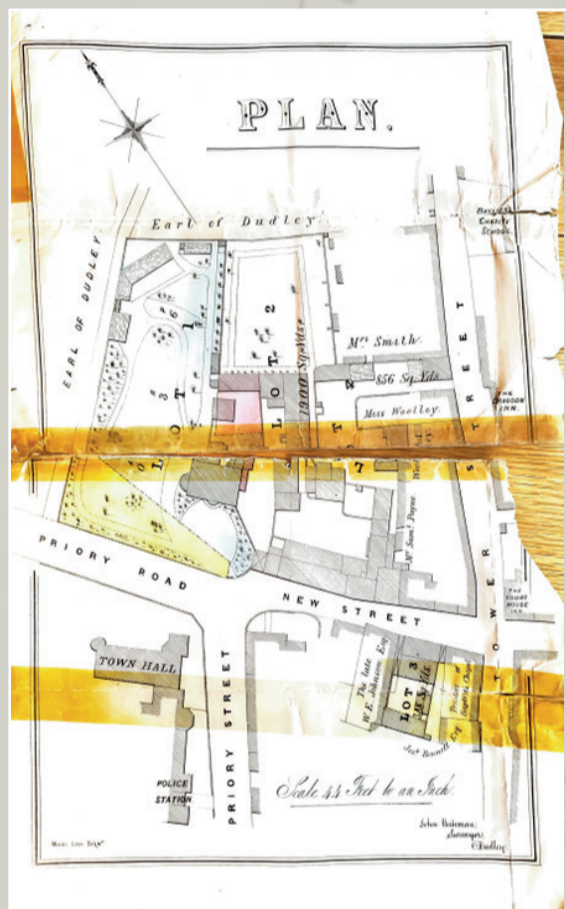
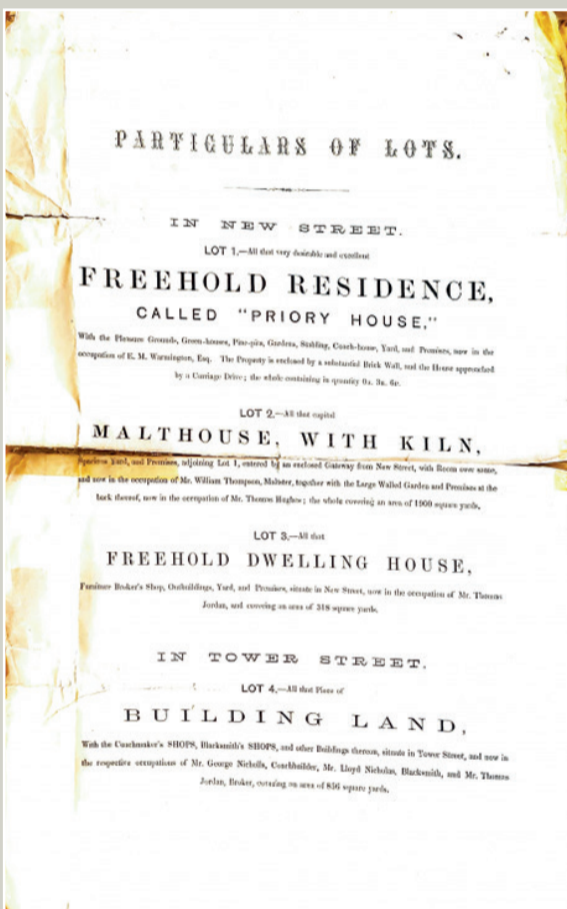
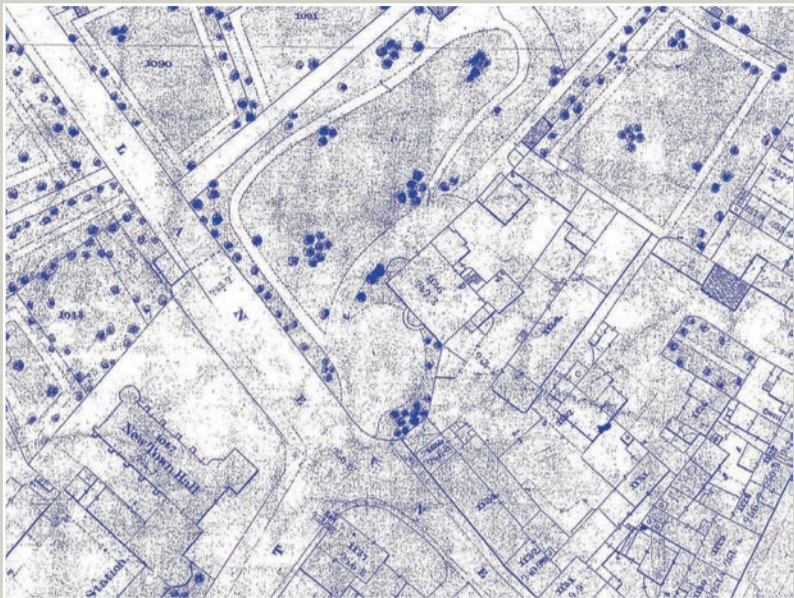
Many of the main rooms retain their decorative plaster mouldings which have been restored over recent years.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

PRIORY HOUSE AS A RESIDENCE

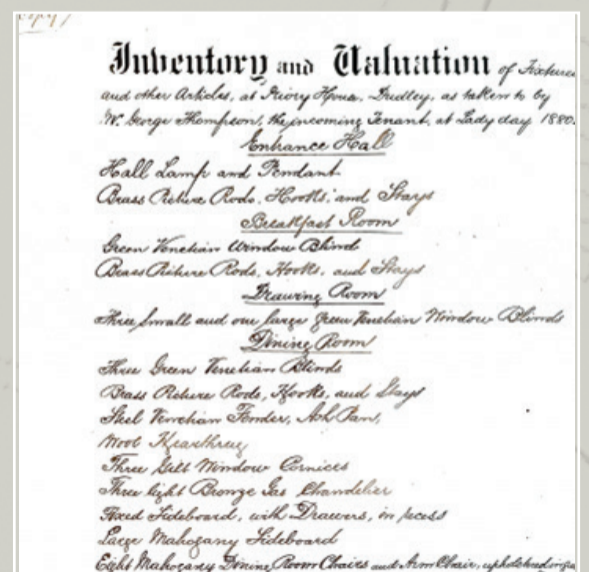
The building would originally have been constructed as a grand residence, with extensive grounds attached, as seen in the Roper map of 1854 (below left) and then the OS first edition map of 1881-87 (below right).



Above left and centre: Auction particulars from 1865 show Priory House being sold as a residence at that time (courtesy of Danny Ratcliffe).

Above right: Plan by E George Coslett, dated January 1903, shows extent of Priory House at this time (plan held at Dudley Archives and Local History Service and reproduced with their kind permission).

Right: Extract from "Inventory and Valuation of fixtures and other articles, at Priory House, Dudley, as taken to by Mr George Thompson, the upcoming Tenant at Lady day 1880" (courtesy of Danny Ratcliffe).



THE DUDLEY JUNIOR CONSERVATIVE CLUB

After almost 100 years of life as a residence, Priory House became accommodation for the Dudley Junior Conservative Club. For some years the problem of possessing suitable premises for the purposes of a political and social club exercised the minds of leading Unionists in the constituency. Premises had been held by the party for about 30 years in Tower Street, but it had long been recognised that these premises were totally inadequate to serve both the political and social aspects of the party.

A scheme had been brought forward to buy the Tower Street building and adjoining property to extend the premises at a cost of approximately £2,000, but when the lease held by Mr William H Thompson ended and Priory House came onto the market, the Unionists were keen to acquire the building. Blocksidge reports that *"It will be recalled that Mr Hy C Brettell at that time put forward a scheme for a combined Eye Infirmary and Dispensary at Priory House, and an effort was also made by the Young Men's Christian Association to purchase it. Neither of these proposals reached fruition, as the former did not meet with the unanimous support of the subscribers, and the latter was dropped in consequence of the inadequacy of the amount raised by the "lightning canvass".*

The proposal put forward for the purchase of the Tower Street premises involved some extensive additions to the existing property, but there was little or no land left for outdoor recreation. When the claims of Priory House were considered, the fact of the beautiful and extensive grounds attached to it was an important incentive, as there was ample ground for the necessary extensions to the property and for the laying out of a bowling green and tennis courts. The need to provide facilities to establish and encourage the social side of the club was seen as essential for the club's success. *"The exigencies of political activity nowadays calls for something more than a glorified publichouse. People do not go to such clubs for the sole purpose of drinking."* (Blocksidge)

It was considered necessary, for the successful working of a club, that some form of both indoor and outdoor recreation for the members must be found. Outdoor recreation was provided through laying out of a suitable bowling green. *"The side lawn will be used as a tennis court, for which there is ample space, without in any way infringing on the borders or walks. These two accessories are recognised as being of the utmost importance, as they will attract members during the summer months, and foster a feeling of companionship and goodwill which will be of material benefit to the Party."* (Blocksidge)

The Club was referred to as "Junior" only in the sense that it had been established more recently than that of the old-established institution near the Castle gates, adjacent to St Edmund's Church, which had been the Conservative Club since its establishment in 1884.

King Charles House, former Conservative Club.



The building was considerably extended to meet the requirements of the Committee. The main addition consisted of a three-story extension which included, on the ground floor, an entrance lobby with staircase to first floor; a bowling alley, billiard room, and an annexe.

On the second floor there was a spacious and well-lighted assembly hall, 38ft wide by 60ft long which was convenient for meetings, concerts, dances, etc. *"The lack of such a convenience at the Tower Street premises has always been regarded as a severe handicap to its usefulness, and has prevented the full development of both the social and political sides of the institution."* (Blockside)

The older, historic part of the building was adapted to accommodate facilities required by the club, including a large smoke room and bar, card room, dining room, caretaker's apartments, etc, on the ground floor; large reading room, committee room, offices, bath room, cloak room and lavatories, etc on the first floor; whilst the second floor was used for offices and caretaker's private room. It was noted that the building was lit by electricity and heated by an up-to-



Photograph from Blockside (1914) showing side elevation and new extension to rear (courtesy of Dudley Archives and Local History Service).

date scheme of heating apparatus on a low pressure system, with attention to proper ventilation of the building. A service lift was also provided to connect the bowling alley, billiard room, and assembly hall with the bar.

Blockside noted that one of the greatest charms of the new Club was its own grounds and their sylvan environment. *"As far as situation is concerned it is undoubtedly the best in Dudley, commanding views of Dudley's historic Castle, Wren's Nest, Priory and gardens, and, while looking round, it is difficult to realise that one is in the heart of the Black Country"*.



A war memorial (right) is located in the building *"In memory of the members of this club who gave their lives for their country in the Great War 1914-19"*.

Ground Floor

MEMORIAL TOWER

RESTORATION



The building has benefited from several phases of improvement works. In around 2008, internal repairs were carried out which included work to restore the intricately moulded ceiling plaster, damaged by 20th century alterations to install suspended ceilings.



In 2015, a project to carry out external repairs to the building and the boundary wall was undertaken through the Townscape Heritage Initiative (first phase), with National Lottery Heritage Fund support. The building is now used for office accommodation and being cared for by the current owners in liaison with the Historic Environment Officer, according to the building's listed status.

Above Restored plaster ceiling, showing intricate mouldings.

Right: Views of the extensive exterior work carried out in 2015.



Acknowledgments:

Blockside Almanack 1914

Pigot's Commercial Directory, Worcestershire 1835

Danny Ratcliffe for documents associated with the building

Bentley's Dudley Directory 1840

