

THE STRATFIRE PROJECT

The Four Gables

Now part of the Shakespeare Hotel (Nos 14-19 Chapel Street)

Documentary History (version 14.6.2024)

1. The documented history of the ownership of today's Shakespeare Hotel has two main threads, one associated with the four-gabled section next to the Town Hall, the other the five-gabled building adjoining it to the south. The 1920s facade to the first of these hides what may have been two separate buildings, though for long periods owned jointly. This report concerns its documentary history of this section and for convenience is referred to as the Four Gables, although for the period before 1920 this would not have reflected the building's appearance.
2. The earliest reference so far located to a building on this site occurs in 1521 in an Inquisition Post Mortem held that year into the estate of the late William Clopton. He was credited with several properties in the town, one of which became the site of the Market (later Town) Hall on the corner of Chapel Street and Sheep Street (Bellew, *Shakespeare's Home at New Place*, p. 73). It was described in 1521 as extending from Sheep Street to the property of Hugh Reynolds on the south, thus identifying the owner or occupier of at least part of the Four Gables site by that date.
3. This was very probably the Hugh Reynolds of Stratford, a gentleman, who died in 1556. He had been an alderman of the Guild of the Holy Cross since 1523 and Master from 1528-32 and again in 1539/40 (Macdonald, *Guild Register*, p. 472). He was also appointed a founding alderman of the Stratford Corporation under its charter of 1553 (*Minutes & Accounts*, i, p. 6). His will, dated 22 August 1556 and proved on 31 October following, does not deal with his real estate (*Stratford Wills*, i, No. 36). However, a settlement of 1551 does include amongst the family properties 'a burgage or messuage 'in Churchstrete [see Para. 4] now in my occupation' to be held for his use and that of his wife Joyce for lives, and then in successive reversion to his children Hugh, Thomas, Katherine, Anne and Frances (Birm MS 3312/397341). An inventory of his goods is a measure of his considerable wealth, totalling nearly £230 (*Stratford Inventories*, i, No. 12).
4. Given that Church Street Ward included both Church St and Chapel St, the 1551 reference to this burgage where Reynolds lived has been taken to refer to the Four Gables site and this is supported by evidence cited in Para. 6.
5. The disentanglement of the subsequent history of the Four Gables rests on evidence of 1624 concerning a dispute concerning other family property. This includes a statement that Joyce Reynolds, Hugh's widow, had died 'some thirty years since' and that Hugh the younger had died without issue soon afterwards. His heir would therefore have been his brother Thomas (TNA, C3/323/43). However, the burials of Joyce Reynolds and Hugh the younger are not recorded in Stratford.
6. An Inquisition Post Mortem of 1590 listing the estates of the late Ambrose earl of Warwick, lord of the manor of Stratford-upon-Avon, records chief rents charged on

properties in the manor and town. Amongst them was 12d. due from Thomas Reynolds for a tenement in the street called 'le Corne Strete et Church Strete' (*Minutes & Accounts*, iv, p.101). In fact, it is the last in a series of entries covering the east side of Chapel St (see also Para. 4). This 1590 survey does not quite tie up with evidence given in 1624 that Hugh, Thomas's brother, had died some thirty years before but is close enough as an approximate date of an event many years earlier. Twelve pence was the rent due from a burgage, defined in the borough's founding charter as occupying a street frontage of 3½ perches (c. 18m or 60ft) each.

7. 'M^r Tho: Raynolds, Gent' was buried on 8 September 1613 without, it seems, making a will and his wife on 3 May 1615 (*Burial Register*, pp. 84, 88). By this time the family, headed now by Thomas's son William, had moved to 'Reynold's House' in Old Town (now the Dower House). William was buried on 22 February 1633, leaving a will showing a much reduced estate (*Burial Register*, p. 122; *Stratford Wills*, i, No. 210). This may have been partly the result of the family's continuing commitment to the Catholic faith. Although William himself avoided direct involvement, his mother and siblings were regularly cited as recusants.
8. One of the possessions to disappear from the family's property portfolio was the burgage in Chapel/Church Street. Indeed, by 1619 a new occupant, Hugh Taylor, is given as holding land beyond the southerly boundary of a property now known as No. 1 Sheep Street next to the Town Hall, extending 60 feet back from Sheep Street (BRU 8/12/18 and see Para. 2). Taylor may have been there from 1611 as he is listed that year in Chapel Street as a possible contributor to a lay subsidy (*Minutes & Accounts*, vii, p. 192).
9. Hugh Taylor is not much in evidence before 1605 but a son Thomas was baptised on 19 October 1609 (*Baptism Register*, p. 78). Hugh had been making his way up the municipal ladder and had got as far as constable by 1608 (*Minutes & Accounts*, vi, p. 481). A continuing interest of the Taylor family in the Four Gables is evident in May 1637 when, in Chapel Street, Thomas Taylor is recorded as liable to a chief rent of 12d for his burgage there (Kent RO, U269/E 949/6; cf Para. 5). Thomas also features in 1659 as the owner of the southerly abuttal to 1 Sheep Street, held in 1619 by his father Hugh (Para. 7; BRU 8/12/28).
10. Thomas, having married Ann Bellamy on 4 June 1632 (*Marriage Register*, p. 34), like his father Hugh, entered the service of the Corporation. In 1637 he served as constable and was later quickly elected as a capital burgess. This was followed by his promotion to alderman in 1649 and he served as bailiff in 1651/2 and then as mayor in 1667/8.
11. In 1643, during the Civil Wars, a Parliamentary pamphlet described in lively detail what happened when three barrels of gunpowder stored at the Market Hall exploded: 'the Hall was torne in pieces in such manner that it is utterly ruined, and divers houses thereabouts have received some small damage'. This may well have affected the Four Gables adjoining the Market Hall immediately to the south.
12. Thomas Taylor's involvement with the Four Gables is further demonstrated in 1662 when he and his wife Ann mortgaged the premises to Henry Venman, to secure a loan

of £100 (ER 3/2828). The property is then described as a house in Chapel Street where he lived and an adjoining house in the tenure of Edward Weston, gentleman.

13. Two adjoining tenements are also implied in Thomas Taylor's will of May 1677 when his main holding is described as 'all that my Messuage or Tenement with the appurtenances scituate in the Chappell street in Stratford aforesaid now in my occupation and in the occupation of Mr Thomas Field' (*Stratford Wills*, ii, No. 388). This, and most of his real estate mentioned in his will, was left to his son John, albeit at the expiration of life interests of his sister and a married daughter in some of the property.
14. John Taylor was also appointed executor but, when it emerged that Thomas had left his estate encumbered with debt, he renounced this responsibility which was granted instead to Richard Jackson and John Woolmer, brothers-in-law of the deceased, and also his principal creditors.
15. In the meantime Joan, one of Thomas's daughters, had on 26 January 1679 married Richard Hathaway (*Marriages*, p. 91). She had been bequeathed £100 together with a collection of household furniture. However, Thomas's executors defaulted on this bequest, claiming that the testator had been so deeply enmeshed in debt as to make his bequests impossible to honour. Richard Hathaway and Joan his wife therefore petitioned Chancery for redress (TNA, C 8/375/124).
16. In the context of this report, the evidence submitted provide hints as to the form of the buildings. After reciting the bequest to Joan of both the £100 and other household effects, taken word-for-word from the will, the petitioners added the words 'alsoe one other Joyned Bedsted one feather bed curtains Vallance Coverlett two pair of Sheetes over and besides the former two pair and pillow Boulsters and all other Furniture belonging to the Bed then standing in the plaister room next the Market Hall'. The wording is a little ambiguous but there would seem to be little doubt that Taylor's principal house (with its 'plaister room' containing at least the bed) adjoined the Market Hall.
17. The Hearth Tax Returns imply the two tenements were held to be Taylor's sole responsibility, with seven hearths listed in his property in 1662 and 1663 and eight in 1670, 1673 and 1674, with an oven also listed in 1670 (*Hearth Tax, 1670*, p. 217).
18. The two houses descended in the Taylor family for another hundred years. John (Thomas the mayor's son, who married a widow, Sarah Powell, in 1726 (*Marriages*, p. 112)) lived until 1747, leaving his entire estate to his unmarried daughter, Mary, whom he appointed executrix (DR 148/1/192). However, Mary declined to serve in this capacity and probate was therefore granted to John's widow Sarah, who continued her late husband's record of paying the chief rent of 12d. to the lord of the manor until her death in 1767 (ER 1/6, 133). Administration of her estate was then granted to her daughter Mary, thus meeting John's original intention (ER 2/216). John was described as a baker on his death (as was his father in a parallel set of deeds) implying a considerable loss of status from the 'gentleman' of 1679. Mary, remaining unmarried, continued to pay the chief rent until at least 1783 (ER 1/134), soon after which the property passed out of the ownership of the Taylor family. The earliest surviving land

tax assessment for Stratford of 1775 confirms Mary Taylor as the owner of the property (WaCRO, QS 77/218/82). Poor rate levies do something to confirm this, with Mary Taylor listed as liable in 1751 (BRT 8/9) .

19. At some point in the second half of the eighteenth century, one of the two buildings on the site of the Four Gables had become the Shakespeare Inn. On the evidence of victuallers licences, the first known licensee was Thomas Ashwin, 1764-9, followed by Edward Johnson, 1778-81, John Nichols, 1783-86 and William Bolton from 1794. A conveyance 16 June 1794 (of which only scrappy notes survive) confirm that it had formerly been made up of two houses, described as late in the tenures of John Smith and Robert Crofts, afterwards of Edward Johnson and --- Millward, late of Mary Taylor, spinster, and now of William Bolton (DR 1030/1/14). Poor rate levies of 1774 and 1777 list 'Late Smith' and 'late Crofts', followed by John Nichols in 1784 and William Bolton in 1788 (BRT 8/10-11). This implies an expansion of the business in the late 1780s, probably associated with the trade announcement (albeit incorrect) that William Bolton, formerly a waiter at the White Lion in Rother Street 'has just entered upon ... a very commodious Inn called Shakespeare's Head in the High Street' (*recte* Chapel Street: PR 149/4). This would also be consistent with the description in 1788 of the northerly abuttal to the Five Gables as a tenement now converted into 'part of the Shakespeare Inn' (ER 1/108, f. 51), implying further that the original Shakespeare Inn was sited immediately to the south of the Market Hall.
20. The deed of 16 June 1794 (of which only notes survive) is said to have recorded that it was Charles Henry Hunt, and not the Taylors, who had sold the property to William Bolton, the tenant, adding that it had been purchased by William Hunt (Charles's father) and William Penn from Mary Taylor (DR 1030/1/14). Of this claim, however, there is no further trace.
21. The Bolton family remained owners of the Four Gables until 1867 when the building was acquired by R.M. Bird. Charles Justins was his tenant who acquired the freehold in 1785 and remained owner until his death in 1897.
22. There are three views from the late eighteenth/early nineteenth centuries showing the two buildings which came to make up the Four Gables. Two of these confirm that one of them stood immediately to the south of the Market (Town) Hall, but set back from it, and was a single-(or possibly twin)-gabled property of two main storeys with a window in the gable(s) (**Figs 1-2**). Due to the setback, the third view (**Fig 3**), from the north, barely shows this gabled building but it is clearly there. Alongside it is a much smaller two-storied building adjoining the Five Gables on the south.
23. In the 1830s both buildings were given a handsome brick and stucco frontage with a porch projecting out onto the pavement. The precise date of this work has not yet been established but a trade card put out by the licensee Edward Leyton thanks 'his Commercial and other Friends for the liberal support he has received since he has kept the above Establishments & begs to inform them he has enlarged & improv'd the Premises which are fitted up & furnish'd in a style he trusts will give general satisfaction' (DR 575). Leyton was licensee from 1821 to 1841, implying the 1830s as a likely decade or this improvement work (**Fig. 4**)

24. Following World War I this frontage was taken down (and the porch removed to stand outside the Red Horse in Bridge Street) (**Figs. 5, 6**) to be replaced by the present four-gabled timber-framed one (**Fig. 7**).
25. Rear views in the 1860s are captured in two engraved drawings by John Blight (**Figs 8, 9**) published in James O. Halliwell, *An Historical Account of New Placce....*, 1864

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Fig. 1 Watercolour of the Chapel St frontage of the Town Hall c. 1780, with gabled building to the south



Fig. 2: engraved view of the Town Hall, c. 1820 with gabled building to the south



Fig 3 Engaved view of the Town Hall, c. 1820, showing a smaller house, next but one to the south.



Fig. 4.Trade card from the 1830s showing the new frontage to the Shakespeare Hotel



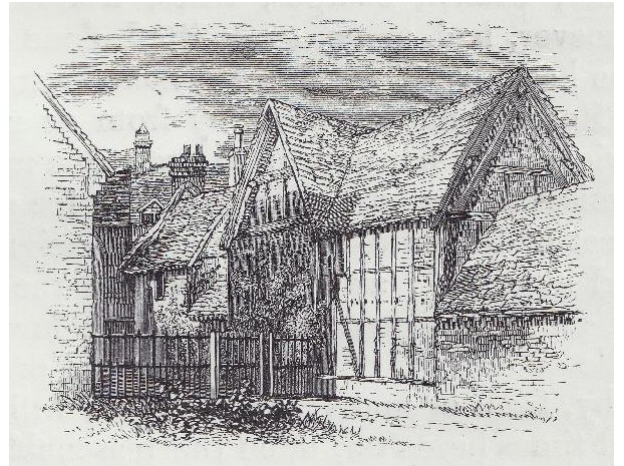
Fig. 5 The Shakespeare Hotel, c. 1880



Fig. 6 The Shakespeare Hotel, 1920, during removal of the earlier front



Fig. 7 Shakespeare Hotel, following restoration, 1920



Figs 8 &9 Engraved views by John Blight, of the rear of the Shakespeare Hotel from the Great Garden