

THE STRATFIRE PROJECT

No. 4 Chapel St

Now part of the Falcon Hotel (Nos 1-3 Chapel Street)

Documentary History (draft – May 2026)

1. In 1553 Stratford-upon-Avon was granted the status of an incorporated borough and, under letters patent issued by Edward VI, was granted the properties in the town previously held by the suppressed Guild of the Holy Cross. This was principally to provide the newly-appointed borough with an income, by means of renting out its properties to support the provision of a school and alms houses, earlier the responsibility of the Guild. These properties included the building occupying the site of present-day No. 4 Chapel Street. Surviving leases and rentals provide a more or less continuous record of the occupants of the site thereafter. Similar records of the Guild of the Holy Cross provide information on the site in the medieval period.
2. In 1553, the tenant of the premises was a tanner, John Bell (MA i 6; BRU8/4/1). By November 1582 the lease would appear to have passed to his widow Joan (BRU 15/7/107). In 1589, a new lease of the premises was granted to Richard Heath, alias Swan (MA iv, 9, 78). He would have been the tenant at time of the 1594/5 fires, but in the next survival a rental of Corporation property of February 1595 occurs the entry, as principal tenant, of 'Mr' Bradley for a house occupied by Francis Smith junior (MA, v, 34). However, it was agreed in September 1595 that Richard Heath, alias Swan, be confirmed in his tenancy of the same house 'that he holdeth': indeed, records confirm that he had been tenant from 1589. This implies some disruption in the immediate wake of the fire but no rebuilding work was specified in his new lease and he was not excused the entry fine (MA v 39). However, there were difficulties in collecting Heath's entry fine (MA, v, 86, 94).
3. Heath installed Thomas Wright as a sub-tenant who paid the official former rent of 13s 4d rent for a couple of years and a detailed survey of April 1599 makes no mention of any fire damage (MA vi, 74). By that time Heath was paying the rent directly to the Corporation but by January 1601 he was badly in arrears (MA vi 110).
4. To recover these these arrears, the Corporation adopted a strategy of foreclosure on Heath's lease and put it in the hands of the two chamberlains for three years to rectify matters. Heath was allowed to remain in possession but without the protection of a formal lease (MA vi 1602).

5. However, by January 1603 Heath was again in arrears. Matters were regularised in May that year when the property was let instead to a yeoman from Feckenham, John Castle, but reserving to Heath a shop (BRU 8/4/11). The rent was greatly increased, from 13s 4d to 53s 4d with Heath's rent for the shop reduced to 4d. By January 1611 the main lease had been assigned to Richard Moore who continued to pay the increased rent until July 1618 (MA vii, 117, 503). Negotiations then began for a new lease to Moore for 41 years but with an obligation 'to build within four yeares all his building on the back syde that is now thatched and to tyle yt' (MA vii 525).
6. In February 1621 it was agreed instead, with no sign of any rebuilding work in hand, to grant this lease instead to Felix Hancock with the same obligation to build at the rear. By November that year Hancock had had second thoughts, and begged to be relieved 'at his earnest suit' to decline the offer. The Corporation then agreed to make a new lease to William Walford, with the same rebuilding requirement, but at the old rent of 13s.4d. Walford was already the owner of Nos 1-3 Chapel Street (BRU 8/4/1)

Evidence of fire damage

It remains to consider whether any of this evidence points to fire damage in the fires of 1594/5. In April 1599, a survey of Corporation property, mentioning several instances of fire damage, records No 4 Chapel St simply as:

Richard Swanne, a tenemente, in the strete side ii baies tiled, from the strete house a range alonge the yarde of ii baies & more tiled, iii baies & a halfe thatched. Att the end of the yarde a crosse backhouse of ii baies thatchd, a sill wantinge on the garden side. The garden in length xxv yardes or thereabout. Over a chamber windowe in the strete a sheete of leade of an ellne longe & a foot & halfe brode or thereabout. The bai which is partli thatch, partli tile, was all tile: a faulte (MA vi 74)

The earliest documentary references to building work occur from July 1618 in the run up to the granting of a new lease when it was agreed that work should take place at the rear:

At this Halle yt is agreed that Richard Moore shall have a lease of his Te[ne]ment in the Chappell Street wher in he now dwelleth for fourtie one yeares begineing at the feast of S^t Michell next paying liii^s iiiii^d per annum and to build within four yeares all his building on the back syde that is now thatched and to tyle yt, and is to pay xxii^s to a fyne and delyver up his old lease at the feast of S^t Michel next (MA vii 525).

This was twice repeated, in February and October 1621 before the premises were eventually leased to William Walford in 1621.

A reason for suspecting fire damage is the same rental of February 1595 when a 'Mr Bradley' accounted for two entries in Chapel St, one in the tenure of William Court and the other in the tenure of Francis Smith junior (MA, v, 34). William Court lived at No. 7 Chapel St (which had to be rebuilt as the result of the fire) and Francis Smith at

No. 4 (Para 2). But Smith was also freeholder of No.13 Chapel St on the corner of Ely St.

On this evidence alone it would seem doubtful that No. 4 Chapel St can confidently be included in the list of fire-damaged buildings at the end of the sixteenth century. However, though the survey of 1599 (MA vi 74) records no obvious evidence of fire damage, by 1617 incoming tenants were successively required to undertake repairs at the rear (BRU 8/4/11). Moreover, the fact that Richard Heath was within years twice in arrears with his rent (MA vii 525) suggests he was not a man of means. He died in May 1605 and his widow took Ananias Nason as a second husband in December of the same year (MA vi 363n). In the end a lease of the premises was made to John Castle (BRU).

The last of the incoming tenants, in 1621, to be required to rebuild at the rear, was William Walford who can be shown rebuilding several properties in Chapel St at around the time, notably the Five Gables (now part of the Shakespeare Hotel), Nos 1-3 (now the Falcon Hotel) and Nash's' House. Perhaps the initial cost of rebuilding the house fronting the street as the result of the 1594/5 had been enough to put him into arrears (Paras 3 and 5), leaving it to William Walford to come to the rescue as far as the buildings at the rear. We may also note that in October 1598 Heath was in dispute with Richard Dixon over a collection of tiles, suggesting that Heat was engaged in some building work at the time (Court of Record; BRU 8/4/11).

By November 1809, the entire property, now divided between three sub-tenants, was in such poor condition that the front range was entirely rebuilt. No lease requiring this work has yet been traced but it must also have involved encasing the rear portions in brick. This contains some timber-framing, though dendrochronological work was independently commissioned.