

THE STRATFIRE PROJECT

No. 29 High St, Stratford-upon-Avon

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1. The earliest surviving title deed for No. 29 High Street so far located dates from 5 June 1678 when the freehold was held by Lawrence Harwood. This at least allows us to link it to a message of five hearths in High Street, from 1670 to 1674 by a man of that name, and a deed of 1683 referring to No. 30 High Street describes it as bounded on the south by a house of Lawrence Harwood. This is further substantiated by a suit roll of 1682-4 which lists, in the following order, Thomas Capp, [No. 26] Mary Rogers and William Cale [Nos 27-8], Mr Lawrence Harwood [No. 29] and John Woolmer, tobacconist [No. 30]. Harwood was a newcomer to the town, not much in evidence earlier than 1658.
2. Despite this lack of title deeds, there is every reason to believe that at an earlier date the freehold of the property belonged to Henry Walker, a well-to-do mercer. This is best demonstrated from the order in which his name appears in a list of the residents of High Street in 1618 where it occurs after the Thomas Rogers house (No. 26-8) but before William Chandler's (No. 30). In 1598, he was listed as holding six quarters of malt, one of barley and four of pease in High Street and consistently served as the headborough for High Street wards from 1615 to 1637. He was elected a capital burgess in February 1598, was promoted to the aldermanic bench in January 1606 and was bailiff in the years 1607/8 and 1624/5. He had died, still an alderman, by 4 December 1644 and was presumably buried in Stratford though there is a gap in the burial register at this time.
3. In a legal case of 1607, Walker gave his age as forty, that he had lived in Stratford for the past twenty years and that he was born in Oxhill. This would have made him in his late seventies when he died in 1644. However, he may have been mistaken about his place of birth. He is more likely to have been the Henry Walker baptised in Alcester in November 1564 where he returned in 1594 to marry Dorothy Dawes. The period he gave for his residence in Stratford (twenty years in 1604) is not easy to verify, the earliest date currently known being in 1591.
4. Walker had four children by his wife Dorothy before she died in April 1601. He must then have remarried (his second wife is not named) by whom he had a further five children. Apparently, and surprisingly, he appears to have left no will. As far as is known, his four children by his first wife were all alive as were three by his second. However, the property appears to have passed to his eldest son by his second wife, William, baptised in October 1608
5. William Walker is generally assumed to have been William Shakespeare's godson, featuring briefly in the latter's will of March 1616 as the recipient of twenty shillings 'in gold'. In June 1637 Walker was elected a capital burgess, was advanced to the rank of alderman and served as bailiff in the year 1649/50. He had married by 1638 and by his wife Frances (surname unknown) had three sons, Henry, William and Samuel, and a daughter Susanna by 1650. On 14 March 1645/6, when he submitted his claims for Civil War losses, (£40 1s 0d), he was living in High St. In the same account 'Old Mr Walker' was recorded as alive when the poll money was first collected on behalf of Parliament.
6. William Walker was buried in Stratford on 1 March 1679/80 and his wife, Frances on 10 July 1682. As with Henry Walker, William apparently made no will. However, if the assumptions made in Para. 1 are correct, Walker must, before his death, have moved from No. 29 to somewhere else in town as Lawrence Harwood had replaced him in that property perhaps as early as 1670.

7. As explained above (Para. 1) Lawrence Harwood had acquired the property by 1678 and perhaps by 1670 when he is recorded as paying tax based on its five hearths. However, the payee for this property in 1662-6 was John Noble. He was a shoemaker who by 1670 had moved his business across the road to a house on the site of today's Nos 8-9. He may have been William Walker's tenant, as initially may Harwood have been, but this would mean that Walker, a member of the Corporation, would have taken up a property elsewhere in the town but for which there is no evidence.
8. Lawrence Harwood mortgaged the property in June 1678, raising further money on the security of the property in 1686 before selling it in 1692 Joseph Smith, a saddler. By this time it had been divided into two tenements, one in Joseph Smith's tenure and the other occupied by Nicholas Smith.
9. No early views of the property have been located but, as happened commonly in other parts of the town c.1800-20, the original front was plastered over. It was replaced by a plain rectilinear frontage of three storeys, with a row of three window openings at first and second floor. It was again remodelled in c.1910, to re-instate twin gables at second floor and to apply across the whole facade imitation timber-framing.

