

THE STRATFIRE PROJECT

No. 32 High Street, Stratford-upon-Avon (site of)

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1. In 1553 Stratford-upon-Avon became 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 council with an income to support the provision of a school and almshouses, earlier the responsibility of the Guild. These properties included the building which in recent times was numbered 32 High Street but which was demolished in the mid-1960s and entirely rebuilt in brick (**Fig. 1**). This in turn was altered several times to provide access to Bell Court shopping precinct culminating in the present view (**Fig 2**).
2. The fabric of the demolished building is not recorded in earlier images with the exception of its appearance from the street in the form of a plain brick facade (**Fig. 3**). However, H.E. Forrest, in *The Old Houses of Stratford-upon-Avon*, 1925 (p. 78) describes it as follows: 'No. 32 High Street, though it looks modern, is really one of the Guild houses with [its] timber frame hidden by a mask of brick walling. It appears to date from about the time of Henry VIII ... A small upper room in the rear has a concrete malting floor. The ceiling beams on the ground floor are supported by a massive post with plain bracket head'.
3. The history of a building on the site can be traced back into the early fifteenth century, mainly through rentals and leases of the Guild of the Cross and then, from 1553, of the Stratford Corporation (see Para. 1). For many years the Guild rentals record a succession of smiths: Thomas Clifford, 1446-1466; Thomas Draycote (if not the same man), 1468; and Richard Smith, 1469-95 (BRT 1/3/130-1). However, in 1525, a lease of the property for 81 years was granted to Henry Biddle, a yeoman and cutler, at an annual rent of 20 shillings (BRT 1/2/555). The property had also been subject to a 3 shilling annual payment from which Biddle secured exemption in 1538/9 (BRT 1/2/586-8).
4. Biddle was a man of some substance, serving the Guild as proctor from 1534, and appointed one of the founding aldermen of the newly incorporated borough in 1553 (*Minutes & Accounts*, i, 6). He died in 1564, buried as 'senex aldermanus' on 11 September, probably a victim of an outbreak of plague, at its height in the autumn of that year (*Burials*, 11). The cutlery business was taken over by Simon Biddle, perhaps a son, recorded as tenant in 1574 and 1582, and again in 1589, in the company of Thomas Biddle (*Minutes & Accounts*, ii, 82-3; iv, 69; BRU 15/7/107). However, when the tenement next occurs, in the accounts submitted by the borough chamberlain in January 1594/5 for the preceding twelve months, payment of the annual rent was made by Daniel Baker, mercer (*Minutes & Accounts*, v, 32). In 1591, and perhaps as early as 1588, Baker had been negotiating with the Biddles for taking over the lease, including their quitclaim of any right in the 3 shilling rent Henry Biddle had in effect acquired in 1538/9 (Para. 3; BRU 9/5/1; ER 2/20).
5. On 4 November 1586 Daniel Baker had married Joan Taylor whose mother Katherine had, in 1561, taken the prosperous Richard Hill as a second husband (*Marriages*, 2, 13). Hill had died in December 1593 leaving to his wife Katherine his substantial house in Wood Street (now Nos 5-6) for 10 years, 'yf she shall so longe live' (*Stratford Wills*, i, No. 100). However, Katherine was made homeless as a result of the fires of 1594/95 and Daniel Baker, who had clearly had

interests in No. 32 High St from 1591 (Para. 4), stepped in to provide his mother-in-law with a new home. This is reflected in a Council order of 3 November 1595 whereby it was agreed that a lease was to be made to Katherine Hill, widow, for the house she holds 'from Simon Bydle', either for the term of her life or for twenty-one 21 years (*Minutes & Accounts*, v, p. 45). This, then, was in effect the property for which earlier in the year (and perhaps from at least 1591) Baker had paid the rent (Para 4). In fact, it was Baker who, in March 1596 brought into the Council chamber Henry Biddle's old lease which had to be surrendered (*Minutes & Accounts*, v, 83).

6. The lease was sealed on 16 December 1595 for which Katherine was excused an entry fine on her promise 'newly to buylde the fore parte or Fronte of the seyd Tenemente towards the streete side at her proper costes' within four years (BRU 8/9/4).
7. However, Katherine died in June 1597 before the work had started and in the following rentals it was Daniel Baker who continued to pay the rent for the property (*Minutes & Accounts*, v, 116; vi, 58, 89, 110). However, it is unlikely that much work was done as in a survey of April 1599 the premises are described as follows:

M^r Daniell Baker holdeth a tenemente on the strete side containinge ii baies tiled and a range on the south side of v baies tiled, att the end of the yarde a crosse house of iii baies thatched, without that in the yarde a newe buildinge of one bai thatched. On the north side of the yarde next the stret house a low leneto over the well tiled. On the backside a garden ranging in bredth answerable to the stret house, in length unto M^r Quineys garden. The whole house & housinge old & ruinous in tile worke & timber worke (*Minutes & Accounts*, vi 72).

Fire damage is not specifically mentioned but it is evident that the building work stipulated in Katherine's lease had not yet taken place. This was still the case in December 1601 when the bailiff, Richard Quiney, scribbled notes of what had been discussed at a recent council meeting, including:

M^r Baker wolde be [...] to performe the buyldeinge of that Tenement in the Highe Streete [...] shortelye (*Minutes & Accounts*, vi, 170).

8. Daniel Baker continued to pay the 20-shilling rent for another two years but by 1604 a sub-tenant, Thomas Bridges, a chandler, is recorded in occupation and he was still there in 1610 when Baker was offered a new lease to run for a further thirty-one years at the customary rent (BRU 8/9/16). As for the entry fine, the Council observed the 'in regarde of his travell [probably 'travail' rather than 'travel'] to be undertaken about our Chamber affaires theie have referred the fine whatsoever more or lesse to his owne choice & likinge' (*Minutes & Accounts*, vii, 131).
9. Thomas Bridges was buried on 24 October 1612 (*Burials*, p. 83) but his widow Joan was allowed to remain as Baker's sub-tenant. Baker was shown further favour in 1619 when, on his surrender of the his most recent lease, he was granted a new one for a further sixty years at the same rent (BRU 8/9/27). Baker was buried on 30 June 1641 (*Burials*, 139). He left a long and detailed will (*Stratford Wills*, i, No. 237) but made no specific arrangements for the assignment of his lease of No. 32 High St which still had many years to run.
10. The residue of his goods, leases etc. not specified in his will he bequeathed to four executors and four overseers to divide between his six grandchildren, i.e. four by

his son Richard (d. 1622), namely Samuel, Mary, Martha and Elizabeth (baptised on 24 February 1622), and two by his son Daniel Baker, namely, Mary and Ann, if and when they came of age. By a codicil of 20 May 1640, Mary (Richard's daughter) and Martha (Daniel's daughter) were in effect removed from this list of residuary legatees as they had been provided for on their respective marriages. In January 1643 it was Elizabeth, by then twenty-two or twenty-three-years old, and 'her sister' (presumably Mary), who was paying the rent of 20 shillings for the High St property (BRU 4/2, p. 169).

11. Eight years later, Baldwin Brooks, one of the four overseers of Baker's will, was named as the man to whom Baker's lease had been assigned, and in April 1655, by which time the house had been sublet to an ironmonger, Edward Smith, the lease of 1619 was eventually surrendered and Smith made a beneficiary of a new one (BRU 2/1, p. 142; BRU 8/9/38). He remained the principal tenant until his death in 1680, bequeathing the lease to his son Joseph, but reserving the 'great chamber' to the use of his widow Mary for life (*Stratford Wills*, ii, No. 398).
12. Subsequent leases of the house are as follows:
 - i) 20.2.1687/8: Joseph Smith, ironmonger (BRU 8/9/45: renumbered BRU 8/9/7/6)
 - ii) 22.8.1733: Abel Payton, ironmonger (BRU 8/9/53: renumbered BRU 8/9/7/7)
 - iii) 25.2.1772: Benjamin Burbidge, mercer (BRU 8/9/61: renumbered BRU 8/9/7/8)
 - iv) 1.6.1789: Benjamin Burbidge, mercer (BRU 8/9/64: renumbered BRU 8/9/7/6/9)
 - v) 24.7.1789: assignment of lease from Burbidge to John Gruby (BRU 8/9/65; renumbered BRU 8/9/7/6/10)
 - vi) 25.4.1817: William Morrell (BRU 8/9/71; renumbered BRU 8/9/7/6/12)
13. Forrest's account of the building in 1926 (Para. 2) establishes that a timber-framed building survived on this site until at least that date, albeit behind a brick facade added in 1816/17 when the property was leased to William Morrell (BRU 2/7, pp. 700, 721). The documentary evidence from the late 1590s (Paras 6-7) implies that it had to be partly rebuilt, probably by Daniel Baker, at a date following the urban fires of 1594/5.

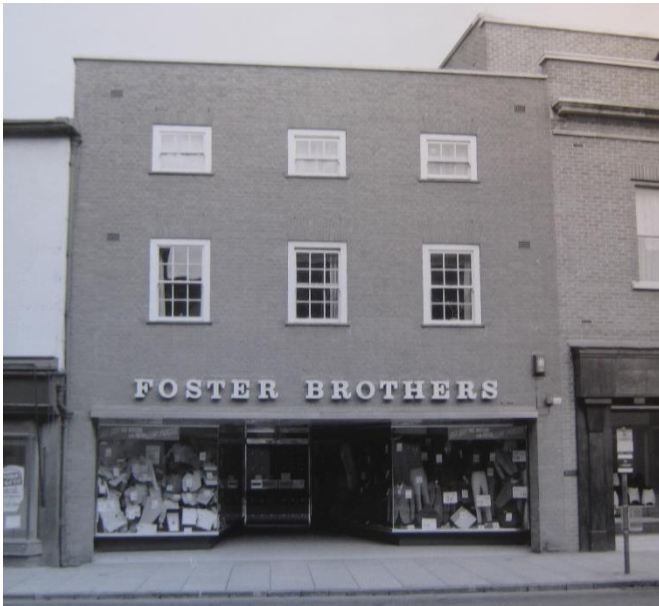


Fig. 1: No. 32 High St, 1971



Fig. 2: entrance to Bell Court, 2023



Fig. 3: No. 32 High St, c. 1920 still with its early 19th-century frontage