

THE STRATFIRE PROJECT

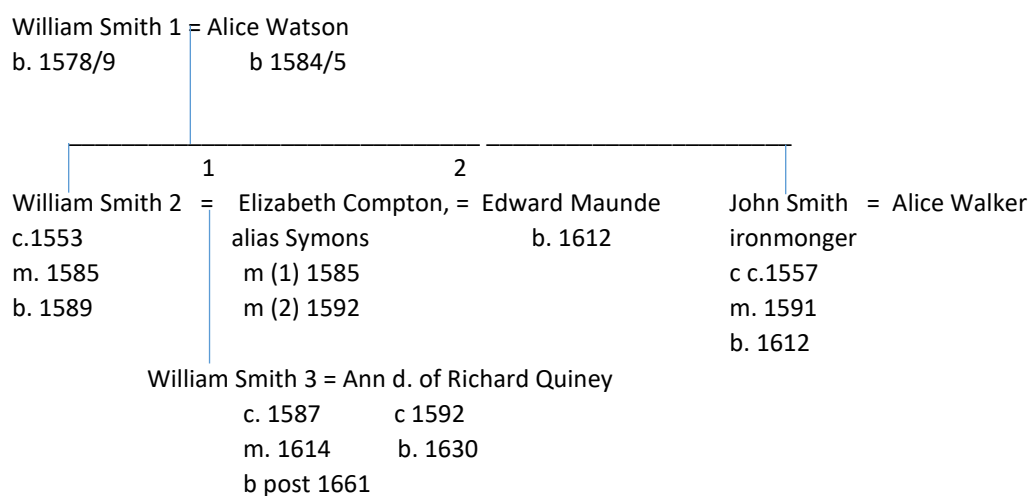
Nos 33-34 High Street, Stratford-upon-Avon

Documentary History (version 15.12.2024)

1. Three separate properties, numbered 33, 34, 35 High Street were demolished in the late 1950s to create a single-unit store for J.C. Smiths Ltd (later Debenhams), a firm which had been operating on the site (or part of the site) since World II. Early photographic images show that, in fact, the three addresses were made up two basic structures, Nos 33 and 34 to the south and No. 35 to the north, both three-storied and with plain brick frontages to the street (**Figs. 3, 4**).
2. Both were freehold properties for which early title deeds are lacking. However, they are flanked by two properties (Nos 32 and 36) which had been granted to the Stratford Corporation in 1553 and later leased out to tenants. The abuttals given in these leases provide some pointers to the ownership and/or occupancy of Nos. 33/4 and No. 35.
3. The house which once stood on the site of Nos 33-34 is known to have been timber-framed and, with a view to determining the extent of the 1594/5 fires, its documented history is therefore relevant to the Stratfire project. Detailed study is possible from 1578 when it featured in the will of William Smith (1), a wealthy linen draper and a leading public figure in the town from the 1530s. However, earlier references to the site, as an abuttal to No. 32, are of interest. In 1472 it was described as a tenement of the duke of Clarence called 'le Bere' which, between the years 1520 and 1539, had become vacant land belonging to the king (BRT 1/2/400, 401, 406, 546, 555, 588).
4. William Smith (1)'s house in 1578 was therefore of fairly recent build. He bequeathed it to his eldest son, William (2), subject to the life interest of the testator's wife Alice. At the time of his death Smith had moved to Worcester and his bequest was simply described as 'All that my house And tennement *with all And singular thapurtennaunces thereunto belongeth where in I dwelled in Stretford aforesayd*' (*Stratford Wills*, i, No. 57).
5. This was presumably the same house to which Smith's widow Alice refers in her will of 1584 (*Stratford Wills*, i, No. 65). After explaining that under her husband's will, she had inherited 'all the Residue of his goodes moveable and unmoveable jewelles and plate whatsoever', she requires her son William (2) to grant 'a lease of the newe howse in Stratford unto his brother John for the full terme of sixteen or seaventene years, and upon such a rent and so reasonable condicions as shalbe thought meete'. If he agrees then William (2) is to have 'all the glasse and wainscott belonging to the ... house and fastened upon the walles'.
6. A third reference does something to clarify the situation for in 1591 the northerly abuttal to No. 32 was described as the tenement of the heirs of the late William Smith (BRU 9/8/1). This would support not only the proposal that the house described in Para.

4 stood on the site of Nos. 33-4 but also implies some uncertainty as to its status after the deaths of William (the elder) and his wife Alice.

7. The next reference usually taken to refer to the house is the will of John Smith, the ironmonger, the son of William (1). He had been in business since at least 1586 but, despite the request to William Smith (2) by his mother to grant John a lease of what has been taken to be the family's main house, there is otherwise no firm indication as to where he lived until 1595 and 1596 when he occurs in the chamberlains' accounts as a sub-tenant of Adrian Quiney at No. 36 High St (*Minutes & Accounts*, v, 32, 74). However, if his house (Nos 33-4) had been damaged during the fires of 1594/5 he may well have been allowed to take up this sub-lease of No. 36 High Street, not known to have been seriously damaged in the fires, as a short-term arrangement. In September 1594 the Council had also considered sending him to Berkshire and Oxfordshire to collect money for fire relief – a possible indication that he had suffered – though his name was later deleted (*Minutes & Accounts*, v, 26). In May 1597 he was also appointed a headborough for High Street ward (*Minutes & Accounts*, v, 103).
8. John Smith made his will in April 1612 when he left various freehold properties to members of his family (*Stratford Wills*, i, No. 139). His main residence was left to his son Thomas, subject only to the life interest of his wife, described as 'all that my dwellinge house which I nowe doe dwell in with the backsyde and Wainscott and glasse thereto belonginge'.
9. However, three years later, the first in a series of title deeds names William Smith, a haberdasher, as the owner of the freehold (ER 3/245). Later deeds record the descent of the property in his family until 1788. To explain the apparent disregard of John Smith's bequest (Para. 8), a case can be made that this William can be identified as William Smith (3), son of the William Smith (2) to whom the house had been bequeathed in 1578 but who had been pressured by his mother to lease it to his younger brother John.
10. The first deed in the sequence (ER 3/245), dated 6 July 1615, concerns the purposes of a recent 'recovery', a fictitious legal action usually originating in an agreement to settle property rights. The recovery had been 'suffered' by Edmund Rawlins of Clement's Inn, gent., and John Watkins of Clifford Chambers, yeoman, in possession by a grant in trust of two houses, to be held thereafter to the use of William Smith of Stratford, haberdasher, one in High Street, in his tenure, and the other in Ely Street where widow Elizabeth Maund lived. Elizabeth was, in fact, William Smith's mother. In May 1585 she had married firstly William Smith (2) who had died in October 1589 and then, in 1592, Edward Maunde who had died in November 1612 (*Registers, Marriages*, 12, 16; *Burials*, 47, 83). It was this William (3) who married Ann Quiney.
11. It is proposed here, then, that, on John Smith's death in 1612, the family had reached an agreement which provided for the freehold to pass to John's nephew William (3) in recognition, perhaps, that John had been no more than a leaseholder by arrangement made under Alice Smith's will in 1584 (Para 5).



12. William Smith (3) was duly rated under High Street in a church levy of 1618 (*Vestry Minute Book*, 2) but, after the death of his wife in 1630 (*Registers, Burials*, 118), he left Stratford to live in Balsall where he is first recorded in 1647 (TR 46/1/9; TR 46/2/12). He was still alive in 1661 (DR 535/2) but must have died soon afterwards.
13. H.E. Forrest, in *The Old Houses of Stratford-upon-Avon*, 1925, describes the building as 'masked by modern brickwork but this ... is a timber-framed house and presents two gables to the rear ... There are two fine paneled rooms on the first floor, nearly all Elizabethan, but the frieze has had all the all the original panels removed and replaced by beveled and moulded panels of apparently early eighteenth-century date. One of the door jambs with elaborate blind tracery appears to have formed part of a church screen'. Edgar Fripp in *Shakespeare Studies*, 1930, includes a photograph of the first-floor room in No. 34 and gives it as his opinion that the 'wainscoted rooms over the shop ... were considerably altered (perhaps after the fires of 1594 and 1595)' (**Figs 1, 2**). Frederick J. Spencer, chemist and photographer, and owner of Nos. 33-4, reminiscing in the 1970s, described the building as follows: 'Unfortunately the original half timbered front has been taken down at some earlier period, probably at the end of the 18th century and replaced by a rather ugly exterior of white brick. Behind this, however, three gables could be clearly seen'.
14. In the context of the Stratfire project, Nos 33-4 was in the occupancy of John Smith, ironmonger, at the time of the 1594/5 fires and there is some evidence (Paras 7 and 13) that the house may have been damaged as a result. However, no description of he house is included in Volume 3 of the *Victoria County History of Warwickshire*, published in 1946, and is not believed to have been included in the official post-war listing of buildings of merit, 1951.



Fig 1: Image of one of the wainscoted rooms, c. 1890



Fig 2: Illustration from Fripp's *Shakespeare Studies*, 1930, of possibly the same room.



Fig 3: Nos 33/4 (left) and No. 35 High St (right), c. 1950



Fig 4 : Demolition of Nos 33/4 and 35 High St, c. 1960