

THE STRATFIRE PROJECT

No. 35 High Street, Stratford-upon-Avon

Documentary History (version 14.12.2024)

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 made up two basic structures, Nos 33/34 to the south and No. 35 to the north, both three-storied and with plain stucco frontages to the street (**Figs 1, 2**).
2. They are flanked by two properties (Nos 32 and 36) which had formerly belonged to the Guild of the Holy Cross but which were granted to the Stratford Corporation in 1553 and leased out to tenants. The abutments to these leasehold properties provide some pointers to the ownership and/or occupancy of both properties.
3. It is from its description as a southerly abuttal to No. 36 that we know that, in 1618 (below, Para. 8), No. 35 was owned by Henry Smith. However, there is some important 'archaeological' evidence which adds to the picture. A letter, dated 1931, refers to building work at 'Noakes and Crofts' (No. 35 High Street) some two decades earlier and to two Elizabethan fireplaces and a plaster overmantel that were then salvaged by Oliver Baker. All three survive today and are relevant to the Stratfire project. The larger fireplace and the plaster overmantel were sold to Arthur Ash of Packwood House whose son Baron Ash built it into the present Great Hall, remodelled out of a barn, where it can still be seen. The smaller fireplace was sold to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in 1931 and was installed at Nash's House (Robert Bearman, 'The "Stratford fireplace" at Packwood House', *Transactions of the Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society*, 96, 1989-90).
4. The larger fireplace is carved with the letters IS, MS and RS (repeated in plaster on the overmantel) and at each end is a wine barrel (**Fig. 3**). These initials, and the nature of the trade conducted there, can safely be taken to relate to John Smith, the vintner, his wife Margaret and their eldest son Ralph. As to the date, John died in 1601 and Ralph was born in 1577, giving a likely date of c. 1597 if Ralph is taken as of age or nearly so. Given that similar plaster work is still to be found at No. 26 High St (Harvard House) and Nos 5/6 Wood Street (Pragnells) (**Figs 4, 5**), both known to have been fire-damaged, it is reasonable to regard No. 35 High Street as similarly affected.
5. John Smith, the vintner, was the eldest son of William Smith, by his first wife, likely to have been born in Stratford before 1558 when the surviving baptism register begins. His father was a prosperous mercer living in Henley Street but with a large family to provide for (*Stratford Wills*, i, 26, 241-2).
6. John Smith, following his marriage to Margaret Sadler in November 1572 (*Marriages*, 6), evidently set himself up as a vintner, recorded on numerous occasions, from 1577, as supplying wine to the Corporation in whose service he had entered two years before (*Minutes & Accounts*, ii, 110, 118). No surviving document specifically links him with High Street before 1592 when he was appointed headborough for the High Street ward (*Minutes & Accounts*, iv, 164). He did hold on lease from the Corporation a tenement in Church Street which he had sub-let by 1591 but apparently not by 1582 (*Minutes & Accounts*, iii, 105; iv, 146). He may therefore have lived there prior to his move to High Street.
7. John Smith was buried on 8 November 1601 (*Burials*, 66) having made his will three days earlier under which his wife was to 'enjoye duringe her naturall lyfe to her proper use the chamber over the Parlour called the newe chamber together with all the maltinge roomes' (*Stratford Wills*, i, 258-9). The rest of the house he gave to Ralph his eldest son but only on condition that

'he use himself well and kindly to his mother, otherwise if he evill behave himself towardes her, that at the descretyon of my Overseers he shalbe dispossessed, and the whole to remayne to my wife' with reversion to Ralph and his heirs, but even then subject to conditions.

8. Margaret Smith lived until May 1625 (*Burials*, 108) and would thus have been entitled, under her late husband's will, to at least the use of the Upper Chamber or, if Ralph had not treated her kindly, to the whole house. However, John Smith's wishes were not followed, or perhaps Ralph had defaulted in his obligations. In any event, even by 1618, and while her son Ralph was still alive, the freehold of No. 35 High Street had passed instead to Henry Smith, Margaret's brother-in-law (BRU 8/9/26; *Vestry Minute Book*, 2). In her will of 1625, Margaret refers to a debt of £13 which Henry owed her which, when recovered, was to be divided between Henry's daughter Margaret and the three children of another brother-in-law, Roger Smith (*Stratford Wills*, i, 26, 376). This would imply some arrangement within the family, which Henry had yet to honour in its entirety, that had included the transfer of the freehold of the family home from Margaret to Henry.
9. Henry Smith had no male issue and in his will of February 1639 he divided his real estate between his daughters, Ann who had married William Hickes, and Margaret the wife of Thomas Dighton (*Stratford Wills*, ii, 8-11). The family home 'I nowe live in' was allotted to the Dightons on condition that 'they shall cheerfully and lovingly bid wellcome ... my said sonne William Hickes and his said wife and children'.
10. Thomas Dighton of Clement's Inn, gentleman, by his will of 11 February 1668/9 (TNA, PROB 11/329/284, proved 1 March 1668/9) left to his wife (unnamed) £400 plus the use for life of 'the house and lands called the Red Lyon in Stratford-upon-Avon ... which she is to hold during her life'. He adds: 'I hope she will live comfortably and be kind and helpful to my children': viz., Ann wife of Roland Woodyear, Elizabeth wife of William Challoner, and Martha, then unmarried. His wife was also to enjoy for life his 'household stuff, goods and plate' after which they were to be sold and the money divided between his daughters and their children.
11. The use of the building as an inn would be consistent with the seven hearths recorded on the premises in the Hearth Tax returns of 1661-74 (*Hearth Tax, 1670*, 217) when Thomas Shackle was tenant. It was recorded as an inn in the middle of the next century (1758/9), although by then its name had been changed to the Kings Arms (ER 3/120).
12. The building, though refronted in the early nineteenth century, was said by H.E. Forrest (*Old Houses of Stratford-upon-Avon*, 1928, 86), to have retained much of its original timber framing and he also mentions a 'tall panel in the south wall ... glazed on the interior so as to show the wattle-work'. However, no views of the building prior to this refronting have been traced.
13. The evidence of the fireplace and its possible date may indicate that it underwent at least extensive building following the fires of 1594/95, especially in view of the similar plaster work to be found at No. 26 High St (Harvard House) and Nos 5/6 Wood St which were known to have been affected.



Fig 1: Nos 33/4 (left) and No. 35 High St (right), c. 1950



Fig 2: Demolition of Nos 33/4 and 35 High St, c. 1960



Fig. 3: The 'Stratford' fireplace at Packwood House, salvaged from No. 35 High St



Fig 4: Overmantel at Harvard House (No. 26 High St)



Fig 5: Overmantel at 5/6 Wood St