

## Debenhams in Stratford was home to other shops throughout the centuries

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**THERE are ghost buildings in Stratford's High Street.**

But there's no need to call a paranormal investigator – the former buildings on the spot where Debenhams is are already being investigated.



JC Smith's (later Debenhams).

The ongoing StratFire project has been researching the buildings that once occupied the Debenhams site (the department store is also due to disappear from the High Street when it's demolished to make way for a hotel).

Teams of experts from the StratFire Project are studying samples of timber from various historic structures in Stratford to try to establish where the timber was sourced – often from Henley Forest – and what happened to these buildings during three big fires that broke out hundreds of years ago.

Ellie Stevenson, author and historian with StratFire, said: “Many people will remember and have enjoyed shopping or even working in Debenhams before it closed.

“Sadly, the building is soon to be demolished. However, it's worth remembering that before Debenhams, other buildings stood in that space, and it's those buildings that the StratFire Project has been exploring as part of its research into the fires of 1594, 1595 and 1614 and we uncovered some surprising stories.”

They've also stumbled across a bit of a saucy scandal involving Shakespeare's daughter.

The project has established that number 32 High Street stood at what is now the entrance to Bell Court. It had a brick façade and was demolished in 1964. But in 1925, it was described by HE Forrest (The Old Houses of Stratford-upon-Avon) as timber-framed ‘hidden behind a mask of brick walling’. The brick had been added in 1816-17 and, according to Forrest, No. 32 dated from the time of Henry VIII (1509-1547).

“As to whether the house had been affected by the fires, we don’t know, but a lease granted to a Katherine Hill in December 1595 included a requirement to undertake substantial building work, so it’s a possibility. Sadly, though, Katherine died in 1597, and in 1599 the house was still ‘old and ruinous in tile worke and timber worke’.”

Numbers 33-34 High Street (to the north of 32) and 35 High Street were demolished in the late 1950s to provide a space for JC Smiths Ltd (later Debenhams), a firm which had been operating in the area since the Second World War. At the time of the demolition the freehold properties were three-storey buildings with brick (stucco) fronts but timber frames survived behind them.

Forrest notes that 33 and 34 had ‘two fine panelled rooms on the first floor, nearly all Elizabethan’ (1558-1603) but that the panels had been replaced by early 18th century ones.

It’s not known for sure if this house was affected by the fires but the occupant of the house, an ironmonger called John Smith was, in 1595 and 1596, a sub-tenant of Adrian Quiney at 36 High Street (now ECCO shoes). Perhaps this was because the house on the site of numbers 33 to 34 was being repaired? Adrian was the grandfather of Thomas Quiney who in 1616 married Judith Shakespeare.

John Smith was the second son of William Smith, a wealthy linen draper and a leading public figure in the town from the 1530s. William had bequeathed his house in High Street to his eldest son, also called William, but at the request of Alice, William senior’s widow, William junior leased the house to his brother John, the occupant at the time of the fires. Before the house was built, the land had belonged to the King (1520 to 1539).

“Sadly, the original half-timbered front of 33 to 34 High Street was removed, probably at the end of the 18th century, and the building wasn’t included in the official post-war listing of buildings of merit in 1951. And later that decade, as we’ve seen, the house was demolished,” Ellie said.

“Also demolished was 35 High Street. No early deeds survive for this property so it’s not until 1618 that we can trace ownership – to a Henry Smith. However, other data supplies more information. A letter of 1931 refers to building work at Noakes & Crofts two decades earlier and to two Elizabethan fireplaces and a plaster overmantel.”

As a vintner, John supplied wine to the Corporation and in his will he gave the use of most of 35 High Street to his son, Ralph, on condition that he treated his mother well. But by 1618, and while Ralph was still alive, the freehold of the house had passed to Margaret’s brother-in-law.

Some evidence also exists to suggest that Ralph had a wayward disposition. In 1613 his name appears in a libel suit with John Lane alleging that Mistress Hall (Shakespeare’s daughter) ‘had been naught[y] with Rafe Smith’.

This may have been slander as Lane didn’t appear to defend his statement, but in 1618 Rafe was named as one of 40 rioters in Stratford’s churchyard, attempting to put up the maypole, which the Corporation had just taken down.

He was also fined in 1621 for not taking communion at Easter.

Two fireplaces and the overmantel at 35 were saved, probably around 1910 to 1911. One fireplace and the overmantel were later sold to the Ash family of Packwood House and built into the Great Hall where they can still be seen.

In 1931 the second fireplace was sold for £30 to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust and installed in Nash's house.

By 1688-89, a will of the time refers to No 35 as 'the house and lands called the Red Lyon...' and the building was also recorded as an inn in 1758, although by then it had changed its name to the Kings Arms.

Ellie concluded: "Like numbers 32-35 High Street, Debenhams will soon be demolished. Nothing stays the same. But what, if anything, will remain from its history, either furnishings or memories?"