

Exciting clues about Stratford's history revealed as carbon dating project drills deeper into old buildings

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AN intriguing time capsule of Stratford's past is emerging as a four-year carbon dating project of buildings begins to reveal the town's hidden history.

Several well-known buildings in Stratford are under investigation as part of The Stratfire Project which uses tree ring dating – dendrochronology – to examine timber-framed buildings that were rebuilt following fires in 1594, 1595 and 1614.

A £40,000 grant from Historic England is funding new research, led by the Stratford Society, into the historic buildings of Stratford town centre.

Jonathan Devereux, Stratfire project manager is excited by the early returns of information revealed in core samples which are six inches long – about the same size as the average pencil.

“Back in the days there would have been many fires because the buildings were not only homes they were businesses as well. These could have been used for tanning and other crafts but there would have been cooking on site, fires to heat the buildings and candles to provide light and the roof was usually thatched so if a wooden building caught fire other buildings could be set alight by the prevailing winds which is why we are now examining our historic buildings,” Jonathan Devereux said.

In the absence of a fire service like we have today, if a building caught fire in Tudor times, often the only way to put the fire out was with buckets of water and a metal hook to pull the burning thatch off the roof while occupants were lowered to the ground to safety from an escape hatch.

“The tree ring core sample is about the length of a pencil and each pair of light and dark rings adds up to one year of growth for the tree. Trees are variable and so is the weather so a light-coloured ring is formed in the spring and summer and a darker ring is formed in the later summer and autumn,” said Jonathan.

It's estimated there were 1,000 elm trees within Stratford in the 15th and 16th century to use for building. It was a local resource and cheaper than buying in timber from the Forest of Arden. Although elm is harder to date than oak the timbers do reveal some interesting clues from a bygone era.

“On these timbers you get carpenter's marks which might be the Roman numerals of I, II, III and IV but all sorts of markings would have been used and we can still see them to this day, the important thing is that the carpenters and masons could match them up to build the structure and its roof – it was a bit like their version of a flat pack from Ikea,” Jonathan said.

The Stratfire Protect team recently presented some of their early findings which showed some interesting discoveries.

The outside of Ecco 36 High Street– the shoe shop –is thought to be 18th Century but excitingly from the few exposed timbers sampled a much older structure was revealed which dates back

to 1473. The core taken is matched to records dating back centuries much like a bar code which enables the team to judge when a tree was felled to construct the building.

The Chaucer's Head Bookshop at 21 Chapel Street was Stratford's first bank, and the Stratfire team discovered that elm was used for its construction. Advanced dating techniques used by Historic England are expected to uncover more of the building's history.

The Shakespeare Hotel in Chapel Street is the largest and most complex of the buildings tackled and consists of three separate buildings with extensive work already undertaken to reveal the Tudor frame carried out in the early 1900s when the portico entrance at the hotel was moved to what is now Marks and Spencer in Bridge Street.

Information about several other buildings in Stratford is still being assimilated and some of them are Harvard House, The Garrick Inn, Nash's House and Hathaway Tea Rooms but the length of the project means additional structures have been or will be visited.

Historian Dr Robert Bearman, a leading authority on the history of the town, proposed the project, which will give insight into how the town would look today had areas not been destroyed by raging fires that broke out centuries ago.

He said: "I'm supervising a group of volunteers to tackle the buildings in High Street and Chapel Street to establish the extent of the fires. We have done about seven or eight buildings and the investigations have revealed the chronological work and every now and then a more detailed history emerges of the buildings. We are hoping we can share our discoveries in more detail soon."



Hathaway Tea Rooms attic.