StratFire: findings from dendrochronology

From samples of wood – oak and elm – taken in High Street and Chapel Street as part of the StratFire Project, it would seem that the fires of 1594 and 1595 were not as extensive as claimed. Certainly, nothing was found to suggest that as many as 200 properties had been damaged.

For example, dendrochronology (tree-ring dating) of timber from a surviving Corporation building (now No.36 High Street, the Ecco shoe shop), for which there is no documentary evidence to indicate fire damage, found timbers dating from 1463 to 1477.

Something similar was found across the road at what is now No.1 High Street (the Stratford Distillery), once the home of Shakespeare's younger daughter, Judith, who married Thomas Quiney in 1616. Here, dendrochronology produced a precise felling date of 1441 for the timbers used in its construction. This is matched, almost to the year, by documentary evidence. So, the fires of the 1590s could not have extended this far along High Street.

There were other surprises, too. Carving over the doorway of No. 26 High Street (Harvard House) showing a date of 1596 was confirmed by dendrochronology, indicating that the previous building had been totally consumed by fire. Yet, next door at Nos. 27-28 (Hooray's), timbers dating from 1431-63 were found. Clearly, this had not suffered the same fate as its neighbour.

William Walford, a major property owner in the town, lived opposite at Nos. 17-18 High Street – a Corporation building – which suffered some damage in the fires of 1594 or 1595. But there is clear documentary evidence, confirmed by dendrochronology, that this was not rebuilt until 1614. In almost the same year, Walford, as freeholder, rebuilt Nos 19-21. He wouldn't have left it so long if these properties had suffered major fire damage.

Among Walford's other properties were Nos. 1-3 Chapel Street (now the Falcon Inn), for which dendrochronology dates to 1621-22, and No. 22 Chapel Street (Nash's House) which dates to 1617-18, shortly after Shakespeare's death. Walford acquired the freehold some time before he made his will in 1624.