

No. 21 Chapel Street, Stratford-upon-Avon

In 1553 Stratford-upon-Avon became an incorporated borough and, under letters patent issued by Edward VI, the newly-appointed Corporation was granted the properties in the town previously held by the suppressed Guild of the Holy Cross. These properties included the building occupying the site of No. 21 Chapel Street. Surviving leases and rentals provide a more or less continuous record of the occupants of the site since then. Earlier records of the Guild of the Holy Cross provide additional information regarding the site in the medieval period.

No. 21 Chapel Street, albeit remodelled in c.1790, remains at heart a timber-framed building. One of the main objectives of the StratFire project is to link such buildings to the serious urban fires of 1594/95; for example, were they affected, does the present structure relate to any rebuilding and, if so, who would have borne the cost?

An initial survey of the timbers has not established a date when they were felled. Dendrochronology (tree-ring dating) largely depends on oak having been used in the building process whereas, in the case of No. 21 Chapel St, elm was almost exclusively used. This is more difficult to date and will need to be revisited.

In the meantime, parallel documentary research has established the use and occupancy of the building. As explained above, it was owned by the Guild of the Holy Cross from the medieval period, the freehold passing to the Stratford Corporation in 1553. On 17 December 1545 the Guild had leased it to Thomas Fyll, a glover, at an annual rent of 12 shillings. After the freehold had been transferred to the Stratford Corporation in 1553 this tenancy passed to Robert Mills who, in 1561, was paying the 12s rent.

Robert Mills was buried on 31 January 1563/4 and from his will made seven days earlier we learn that he had taken responsibility for the young children of Thomas Fyll deceased, including the cost of clothing for Thomas Fyll junior before sending him to London, probably to serve an apprenticeship. There was thus a link between the Fyll/Mills families but whether this was a family or business one is not at present clear. He also names his under-age son William but to complicate matters further he made minor bequests to two step-daughters, Alice and Margaret Smithson, presumably the children of his wife Benet by an earlier marriage.

At some point the lease was assigned to Robert Gibbs, a yeoman, who first occurs as paying the 12s. rent for the Chapel Street house in a rental of 10 March 1573/4. Early in 1582 the house was described as 'sufficiently repaired save a little outhouse lacketh tiling & a piece of a bay is thatched which was tiled before his time' and that Gibbs still held the property under the old lease made to Thomas Fyll.

When, in 1591, Fyll's lease sixty-one-year lease of 1545 was nearing its end, Gibbs negotiated for a new lease of the property. This was sealed in September of that year and was for 31 years at the former rent, subject to the payment of an 'entry' fine of six pounds. Robert Gibbs was a man of some substance and in November and December 1595, during a period of food shortage, he had been bound over in £120 not to make any further malt or to allow it to be 'delivered out of his house'. His holdings were recorded as 25 quarters of malt and 10 quarters of barley. Given that only ten quarters were his, but that his household comprised '4 persons', he was ordered 'to bring unto the market at Stratford weekly six strykes of malt'.

Gibbs's payment of the 12s. rent for his house was listed in the chamberlain's account submitted on 9 January 1595/6 but amongst the Corporation's expenses over the previous 12 months, was a payment of 9s. to Robert Gibbs for his loss of 12 strikes of barley. The next entry in the account is for 3s. 4d. 'by the 3 strikes of beans the which I payed him by Mr Baylyes & the companies appointment'. This may mean that Gibbs had suffered losses in one of the 1594/5 fires and that, as a man who had been serving the Corporation as serjeant-at-mace since 1579, he had been compensated for his losses. He was buried on 14 June 1596 but for whom no extant will or inventory survives.

On 29 April 1597 the Council agreed that 'Julius Shaw to have a lease of house granted to Robert Gibbs for as many years that are to come on the old lease, fine of 20s. only as the former lease was void because it had been sold without consent of the Corporation'. Quite what had occurred is uncertain but those responsible for Gibbs's estate had presumably sold the lease of No. 21 Chapel Street to an unnamed third party without the Corporation's consent. Alternatively, there may have been no intermediary sale, Shaw purchasing the lease directly from Gibbs's administrators. Either way, this would have made Gibbs's lease invalid, explaining the Corporation's decision to grant Shaw a new one.

July's lease for 31 years was sealed on 11 May 1597 and in a survey of Corporation property, taken in April 1599, it is described as 'a tenement, in the street, 2 bay tiled, on the backside a barn of 2 bays with either side a deep lean-to thatched. More inward another cross backhouse of 2 bays thatched; between that & the street house a range of 1 bay thatch & 2 bays tiled & a garden answerable in breadth to the house, in length as John Tomlins'. As several other buildings in this same survey are described as having been burnt down or damaged in the fires, this description would seem to rule out serious damage – or indeed any damage at all. However, there is also Gibbs's recent death to take into consideration and also the compensation paid to him the year before for damage to harvested crops. Furthermore, doubts seem to have arisen over the way his lease of 1591 had been handled after his death.

July son of Rafe Shaw was baptised on 2 September 1571. Rafe was a wool driver, with a house in Henley Street which in his will of March 1592 he left to his wife for life, or until any second marriage, with reversion to his second son, William, then under age. While his mother was alive, July would have been able to remain in the Henley Street but in October 1594 his mother married for a second time, forfeiting her life interest in the house and, with his brother William due to come into his inheritance in 1598, July clearly had good reason for looking for a new home, hence his move to Chapel St in 1597.

July Shaw lived at the house until his death in 1629. He was elected a capital burgess in 1603, chamberlain in 1610, alderman in 1613 and bailiff in 1615/16 and again in 1627/8. Twice his lease was re-negotiated, first in 1613 when a further term of 32 years was granted, and then in 1626 for a generous 61 years but on both occasions always subject only to the old annual rent of 12s. In this second lease, the dimensions of the property are given: 26ft along the street, 180ft. in depth and with a rear boundary of 30ft.

He made his will on 1 November 1628 and the generous lease he had negotiated for his Chapel St house was bequeathed to his wife Ann for life, or until her re-marriage, with reversion to John Bromley 'which I keep' (July was childless). His widow Ann, due to enjoy a life interest in the property, was buried soon after, on 25 October 1630, with an inventory taken the same day. This shows the house then comprised, at a minimum, a hall, a little chamber, 'small rooms & backside' (including by implication a kitchen), and over the hall, 'a great chamber'. Like her husband, she

included mention of John Bromley 'whom I keep', who would inherit the lease of the family home when he came of age.

John Bromley is thought to be the John son of John Bromley junior baptised on 28 December 1617 who became fatherless on 27 April 1621 and possibly motherless in the same year. The reason for his adoption by the childless Shaws is not known but he would have come of age in 1638 when he took over payment of the 12s. rent to the Corporation until his death in 1655. His widow Elizabeth then took over this payment until she too died in June 1677. In her will of 16 May 1677 she bequeathed the lease of the house to her daughter Susanna Bromley who died in September 1693.

In 1674, Elizabeth Bromley, now widowed, surrendered the former lease and negotiated a new one securing the family's tenancy in what was now described as 'all that messuage or tenement in Chapel Street in her occupation between the tenement of Mr Thomas Nash on the south; the tenement in the occupation of William Baker, brazier, on the north; and the said street on the west'. The lease is not specifically referred to in Susanna Bromley's will but evidently it was assigned to Thomas Burman, a dyer.

In July 1790 another lease was negotiated, this time between the Corporation and Charles Henry Hunt of Stratford-upon-Avon, for 41 years, of a house in his tenure. It was made a condition of the lease that Hunt 'shall and will within the space of one year from the commencement of the lease take down the said messuage and shall and will lay out and expend the full sum of £60 in building and reedifying the same upon or near to the spot or ground where the same now stands in a good and substantial manner and produce vouchers [etc] for the expenditure' (BRU 8/42). This was quickly done, as far as the front part of the present building is concerned (Fig. 1) although, to the rear the fabric of the original building was largely retained, captured in a mid-19th-century drawing by John Blight (Fig 1). Charles reopened the building as a bank but following his bankruptcy the concern was taken over by a larger concern, Battersbee and Morris (BRU 8/4/44).



Fig. 1

Watercolour by James Saunders of east side of Chapel St, c. 1810, showing (penultimate building at the far end) the rebuilt No. 21 Chapel St



Fig. 2

Rear of No. 21 Chapel St, drawn by J.T. Blight, c. 1850