

No. 22 High Street (site of)

General description

The corner of High Street and Sheep Street is currently an open space, bounded by a modern development reaching down Sheep Street, built in 1963-4. This replaced a Corn Exchange, and a shop on the very corner, dating back to 1850. Even earlier a timber-framed house stood here, with a documentary history indicating fire damage in the 1590s. Its appearance is preserved in a number of drawings, really of the Town Hall but fortunately including the building of what was on the opposite corner. Here, then, was a site worth investigating as part of the Stratfire Project.

The building that stood here was amongst those granted to the Stratford Corporation in 1553 and its later history can be largely deduced from a series of surviving rentals, surveys and leases documenting its occupancy over more than 400 years. Indeed, earlier than 1553 its history can be pushed back even further when the freehold belonged to the Guild of the Holy Cross.

By 1513 Adrian Quiney, a prosperous mercer, was the Guild's tenant of the property, followed by his son Richard and then by his grandson, another Adrian. By 1561, however, this younger Adrian had sub-let the premises to Roger Sadler, a baker. At some point – we don't know exactly when – Sadler became the principal tenant. On his death in 1578, and, having no children of his own, he left the leasehold house in High Street, 'wherein I doe nowe dwell', to Hamnet Sadler, his 'Cosin' (probably nephew). Though barely eighteen, Hamnet would probably have already been taken into Roger's bakery business. Hamnet remained at the property until 1614 so was therefore the principal occupier of the premises at the time of the 1594/5 fires.

A survey of Corporation property in 1599 records some fire damage. The main building facing High Street seems to have escaped serious damage but two bays of a range at the back had to be rebuilt together with buildings further down Sheep Street. Rebuilding costs seem to have cost him dear. In 1596 he surrendered his interest in properties in Church Street which he had been given by his uncle Roger, he was pursued for debts in the local court, was in rent arrears in 1602, 1607 and 1613, and when he surrendered the lease in 1614 the range running down Sheep Street was recorded as 'much out of repaire'.

Hamnet Sadler, shortly after the death of his wife Judith early in 1614, gave up the lease of the High Street property which then passed, somewhat tortuously, to another baker, John Smith. Sadler was buried in October 1624, leaving no will. There is little evidence on how he passed his final years except for the inclusion of his name early in 1616 as a beneficiary in Shakespeare's will, which he also witnessed, for money to buy a mourning ring. By what may have been simply a coincidence, in September of that same year, Hamnet Sadler's daughter Judith gave birth to an illegitimate child, christened Robert her 'bastard'. Judith was twenty years old and this was not the only time she was to suffer in this way. In May 1622 she was cited in the local church court for similar 'incontinence', the result of giving birth to another illegitimate child, christened Judith, the previous January.

John Smith, Hamnet Sadler's successor in the bakery business, continued to trade there into the 1620s and subsequent leases of the property were made to later generations of the family for over 150 years. They did not live there, however, but sublet the property, often divided into two, and sometimes, three units. By 1704, the main section premises had been sublet as a tavern known initially as the Crown but from 1790s as the Wheatsheaf. An estimate for repairs of 1798 was probably when a layer of stucco was applied, to the front elevation at least (Fig. 3).



Fig. 1: The Corn Exchange and the Sheep St corner c.1950



Fig. 2: site of the Corn Exchange, c.1958



Fig. 3: Town Hall and No. 22 High Street c.1810



Fig. 4: Similar view when Thomas Newey was tenant of the corner property 1815-30



Fig. 5: view of the south end of High St, c.1825, showing No. 22 in use as an inn.