

## STRATFIRE PROJECT

### No. 32 High Street, Stratford-upon-Avon

The StratFire Project, investigating the effect on the town of the urban fires of 1594 and 1595, is not limited to the study of timber-framed buildings still to be found in High Street and Chapel Street. For a better idea of the extent of these fires, we are looking into the site histories of every property in these two streets for references to fire damage (or not), regardless of whether the building that stood there at the time has since been demolished.

One such building, numbered 32 High St, once stood on the site of the High Street entrance to Bell Court, the modern shopping precinct (**Fig. 1**). In early views it presented a plain brick facade to the street (**Fig. 2**), demolished in 1964 and replaced by a completely new brick building but with a similar facade (**Fig. 3**). After several refashionings, this has given way to the present access. But before these demolitions, the house had attracted the attention of H.E. Forrest who, in his *Old Houses of Stratford-upon-Avon*, published in 1925, described it as basically timber-framed 'hidden by a mask of brick walling'. Here, then, was a site worth investigation.

The history of this building can be traced back into the early fifteenth century, mainly through rentals and leases of the Guild of the Cross and then, from 1553, of the Stratford Corporation to whom the building belonged. However, in the context of the present investigation, the story is taken up in 1525 when it was leased to Henry Biddle, a yeoman and cutler, for 81 years. He died in 1564 and his lease and business were taken over by other family members.

From at least 1591, if not 1588, Daniel Baker, a mercer, had become involved with the Biddles in the management of the property and by 1594/5 was paying the rent. Quite what had happened to bring about this change is unclear but it was evidently linked to the fortunes of Katherine Hill, widow of the prosperous wool-merchant, Richard Hill. He had died in December 1593 leaving to his wife Katherine his substantial house in Wood Street (now Nos. 5-6). However, she was made virtually homeless as a result of the fires of 1594/95 which destroyed her Wood Street house. Daniel Baker, it seems, then stepped in to provide her with a home at No. 32 High Street.

Why would he do this? On 4 November 1586 Daniel Baker had married Joan Taylor whose mother Katherine had taken Richard Hill as her second husband (*Marriages*, 2, 13). In other words, Katherine was his mother-in-law. On 3 November 1595 the Corporation agreed that if she surrendered Biddle's old lease she would be granted a new one either for life or for 21 years. And it was Baker who in March 1596 brought into the Council chamber the surrendered lease.

The new lease had been sealed on 16 December 1595 but Katherine had been excused what was known as an entry fine on her undertaking 'newly to buylde the fore parte or Fronte of the seyde Tenemente towards the streete side at her proper costes' within four years (BRU 8/9/4). However, she died in June 1597 before this work had started and over the next few

years it was Baker who continued to pay the rent. It is unlikely that much work was done as in a survey of April 1599 the premises are described as follows:

M<sup>r</sup> Daniell Baker holdeth a tenemente on the strete side containinge ii baies tiled and a range on the south side of v baies tiled, att the end of the yarde a crosse house of iii baies thatched, without that in the yarde a newe buildinge of one bai thatched. On the north side of the yarde next the stret house a low leneto over the well tiled. On the backside a garden ranginge in bredth answerable to the stret house, in length unto M<sup>r</sup> Quineys garden. The whole house & housinge old & ruinous in tile worke & timber worke.

Fire damage is not specifically mentioned but it is clear that the building work, as stipulated in Katherine's lease, had not yet taken place. This was still the case in December 1601 when the bailiff, Richard Quiney, scribbled notes of what had been discussed at a recent council meeting, including:

M<sup>r</sup> Baker wolde be [.....] to performe the buyldeinge of that Tenement in the Highe Streete [...] shortelye.

Daniel Baker continued to pay the 20-shilling rent for another two years but by 1604 a sub-tenant, Thomas Bridges, a chandler, is recorded in occupation and he was still there in 1610 when Baker was offered a new lease to run for a further 31 years at the customary rent. Baker was shown further favour in 1619 when, on his surrender of the latest lease, he was granted a new one for a further 60 years at the same rent. Baker was buried on 30 June 1641. He left a long and detailed will but made no specific arrangements for the assignment of his lease of No. 32 High St. which had many years still to run.

Forrests's account of the building in 1925, as explained above, establishes that a timber-framed building survived on this site until at least that date, albeit behind a brick facade added in 1816/17. The documentary evidence from the mid-1590s, whilst not attributing the poor state of the building to fire damage, clearly indicates that rebuilding work was necessary. Given the location of the building in an area where fire had established a foothold, damage from the conflagration is therefore a possibility.



**Fig. 1: Entrance to Bell Court, 2023**



**Fig. 2: 32 High St, c. 1935**



**Fig. 3: 32 High St, 1971**