

## STRATFIRE PROJECT

### Nos. 33-34 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. To get a better idea of the extent of these fires, we are looking into the site histories of every property in the two streets for references to fire damage (or not), regardless of whether the building that stood there at the time has since been demolished.

Just such a case were the two buildings demolished in the late 1950s to create a store for J.C. Smiths Ltd (later Debenhams), a firm which had been operating on the site (or part of the site) since World II. They are clearly shown in photographs prior to their demolition, the one to the south then numbered 33 and 34, and the one to the north as 35. Both buildings were three-storied and with plain brick frontages to the street (**Figs. 1,2**). However, we know that timber frames had survived behind these frontages. H.E. Forrest, in *The Old Houses of Stratford-upon-Avon* (1925), when writing about Nos 33-4, describes the building as 'masked by modern brickwork but this ... is a timber-framed house and presents two gables to the rear ... There are two fine panelled rooms on the first floor, nearly all Elizabethan, but the frieze has had all the original panels removed and replaced by bevelled and moulded panels of apparently early eighteenth-century date'. Edgar Fripp in *Shakespeare Studies*, 1930, includes a photograph of one of the first-floor rooms and posed the question of whether the 'wainscoted rooms over the shop ... were considerably altered (perhaps after the fires of 1594 and 1595)' (**Figs. 3,4**). Frederick J. Spencer, chemist and photographer, and owner of Nos 33-34, reminiscing in the 1970s, adds: 'Unfortunately the original half-timbered front has been taken down at some earlier period, probably at the end of the 18th century and replaced by a rather ugly exterior of white brick. Behind this, however, three gables could be clearly seen'. Clearly, then, it is a site worth investigating.

Detailed study is possible from 1578 when the property featured in the will of William Smith (1), a wealthy linen draper and from the 1530s a leading public figure in the town. By the terms of his will, he bequeathed the house, evidently built since 1539, to his eldest son, William (2), subject to the life interest of the testator's wife Alice.

Alice died in 1584 but in her will she sought to change her late husband's arrangements, declaring that she would allow William (2) 'all the glasse and wainscott belonging to the house and fastened upon the walles' if he would grant 'a lease of the newe howse in Stratford unto his younger brother John for the full terme of sixten or seaventene years, and upon such a rent and so reasonable condicions as shalbe thought meete'.

John Smith, the son of William (1), had been in trade as an ironmonger since at least 1586, presumably, as requested by his mother, as occupant of the main Smith residence. This led to his appointment in 1597 as headborough (or petty constable) for the High Street ward. However, for a couple of years immediately following the fires of 1594/5 we find him as the tenant of a Corporation house nearby not known to have been affected by the fires. Could he perhaps have been allowed to take up temporary residence there whilst his main house was under repair?

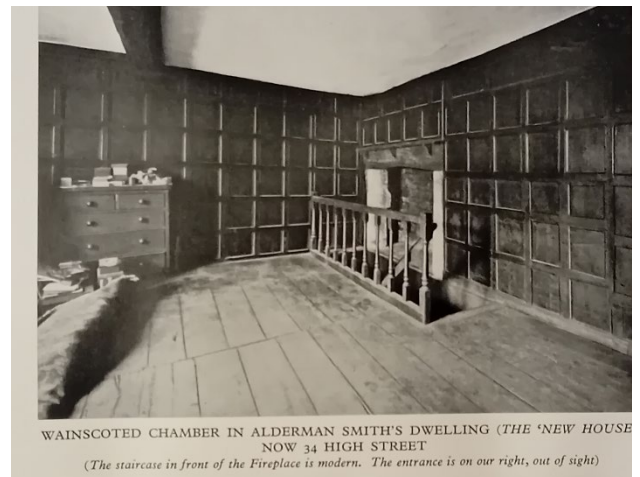
If William Smith (2) had followed his mother's request that he lease Nos 33-4 to his brother John Smith for sixteen or seventeen years, then John's leasehold interest would have ended in around 1600. In any event, in 1615, it is clear that by then the Smith's main house was in the hands, not of Thomas, but of a haberdasher, William Smith. This William is thought to be the son of the William Smith (2) who had earlier been pressured by his mother to lease the family home to his younger brother John. On William's death in 1589, the freehold would thus have passed to William (3).

William Smith (3), after the death of his wife in 1630, left Stratford to live in Balsall, in Warwickshire. First recorded there in 1647, he was still alive in 1661 but must have died soon afterwards. The property, leased out to tenants, descended in his family until 1788.

To sum up, at the time of the 1594/5 fires, the house was in the occupancy of John Smith, ironmonger, and surviving evidence implies, given his temporary residence at a neighbouring property immediately afterwards, that his main house had been seriously damaged. Fripp, in 1930 (see above) also believed that the wainscot in the upper rooms may have been of post-fire date.



**Fig. 1: Image of one of the wainscoted rooms, c.1890**



**Fig. 2: Illustration from Fripp's *Shakespeare Studies*, 1930, of possibly the same room**



**Fig. 3: Nos 33-34 (left) and No. 35 High St (right), c.1950**



**Fig. 4: Demolition of Nos 33-34 and 35 High St, c.1960**