

STRATFIRE PROJECT

No. 35 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 War II. They are clearly shown in photographic images 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 and 2**). However, H.E. Forrest (*Old Houses of Stratford-upon-Avon*, 1928, 86) refers to No. 35 having retained much of its original timber framing and he also mentions a 'tall panel in the south wall ... glazed on the interior so as to show the wattle-work'. Clearly, then, it is a site worth investigating.

No early title deeds survive for the property and it is not until 1618 that we know that the house was owned by Henry Smith. However, there is some crucial 'archaeological' evidence, supplemented by family wills, which allows us to trace its history back further. A letter of 1931 refers to building work at 'Noakes and Crofts' (No. 35 High Street) some two decades earlier and to two Elizabethan fireplaces and a plaster overmantel that were salvaged by Oliver Baker. All three survive today and are relevant to the StratFire project. The larger fireplace and the plaster overmantel were sold to Arthur Ash of Packwood House whose son Baron Ash built it into the present Great Hall, remodelled out of a barn, where it can still be seen. The smaller fireplace was sold to the Shakespeare Birthplace Trust in 1931 and was installed at Nash's House. The full story is told in Robert Bearman, 'The "Stratford fireplace" at Packwood House' (*Transactions of the Birmingham and Warwickshire Archaeological Society*, 96, 1989-90).

The larger fireplace is carved with the letters IS, MS and RS (repeated in plaster on the overmantel) and at each end is a wine barrel (**Fig. 3**). These initials, and the symbol of his trade, must surely relate to John Smith, a vintner, his wife Margaret and their eldest son Ralph. John died in 1601 and Ralph was born in 1577, so if, as seems likely, Ralph was a young man, then a date of 1596 or 1597 for these features would seem likely. And when we find similar overmantels at No. 26 High St (Harvard House) and Nos 5/6 Wood Street (Pragnells) (**Figs. 4, 5**), both known to have been fire-damaged, it can be safely assumed that No. 35 High Street was too.



Fig. 1: Nos. 33/4 (left) and No. 35 High St (right) c. 1950



Fig 2: Demolition of Nos 33/4 and 35 High St, c. 1960



Fig. 3: The 'Stratford' fireplace at Packwood House

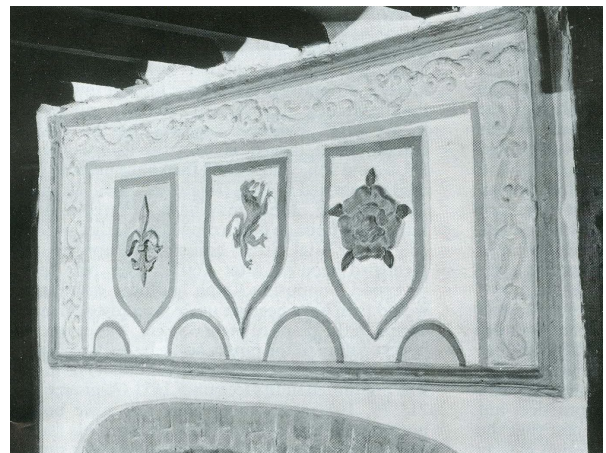


Fig. 4: Overmantel at Harvard House



Fig. 5: Overmantel at 5/6 Wood St