

No. 36 High Street, Stratford-upon-Avon

The focus of the StratFire Project is on surviving timber-framed houses in High Street and Chapel Street, Stratford-upon-Avon. In particular, were they affected by the two urban fires of 1594 and 1595? No. 36 High Street has an eighteenth-century brick frontage to the street, so may not seem an obvious choice for investigation. Nevertheless, earlier references to the property do indicate that behind this frontage there survives a timber-framed building. One describes a wide stone fireplace 'at the back of the shop', apparently uncovered in May 1943, a photograph of which still survives [Fig 1].

In 1553 Stratford-upon-Avon was granted the status of an incorporated borough. Under a charter issued by Edward VI, it received the properties in the town previously held by the suppressed Guild of the Holy Cross. These included the building occupying the site of No. 36 High Street. Later Corporation leases and rentals provide a more or less continuous record of the occupants of the site thereafter. From surviving records of the Guild of the Holy Cross, investigation can also be pushed back into the medieval period.

The building on this site has already attracted the attention of those with an interest in William Shakespeare and his family. By at least 1574 the house was held by Adrian Quiney under a lease from the Stratford Corporation. On his death this lease passed to his son Richard and then to Richard's widow Elizabeth. In 1612 she arranged that the lease should go next to her son Thomas Quiney. In 1616, Thomas married William Shakespeare's daughter Judith, whereupon the couple moved to a larger property on the corner of High Street and Bridge Street.

Documentary research for the StratFire project has added an exciting new dimension to the story of No. 36. The Quiney leasehold can be traced back to the period when the freehold belonged to the Guild of the Holy Cross. In 1500/01 rentals reveal that it was then held by Roger Paget and that it was known as the Clockhouse.

The Clockhouse is first mentioned in 1421/2, probably so named because a bell and clock were attached to the building in some way. By the 1460s the house was in poor condition, yielding a 'decayed' rent of 3s. instead of 5s. 8d. However, in March 1473, the Guild leased the property to a wealthy mercer, Roger Paget, on the understanding that he would rebuild it. [Fig 2]. His new lease also included the obligation to maintain a warden to look after the bell and clock. Seven years later the clock itself was removed to the market cross which then stood at the corner of High Street and Wood Street.

This rebuilding soon after 1473 has now been confirmed by tree-ring dating. Despite the building's 18th-century outward appearance, it is at heart a timber-framed structure. In particular, two oak roof trusses were discovered on the second floor. Analysis of these indicates that the tree (or trees) from which the trusses emerged were felled between 1463 and 1477. This coincides very neatly with the documentary evidence for rebuilding, as specified in the lease of 1473.

In the context of the StratFire Project, this is of particular interest. One of the fires of 1594 and 1595 had as its epicentre the area at the south end of High Street. So, if the fire spread as far northwards as No. 36, clearly it did not lead to a complete destruction and rebuilding of the property. In fact, in a survey of Corporation property taken in 1599, which makes several references to fire damage, the building on the site of No. 36 is not included amongst those needing building work.

The 18th-century re-fronting of the building is specifically referred to in a lease of December 1758 when the incoming tenant was instructed to 'new front the said house with brick'. A drawing of the new elevation also survives [Fig. 3]. However, the work may not have been done immediately. There is also an estimate, dated 4 November 1796, for substantial repair of the house including a requirement 'to take down part of the front foundations where they have given way; rebuild the same in a more substantial manner'.

Planning permission has recently been granted for the demolition of the building to the south of No. 36. If this goes ahead, perhaps more of the original frame will be revealed.



Fig. 1: Fireplace 'at the back of the shop' photographed in May 1943

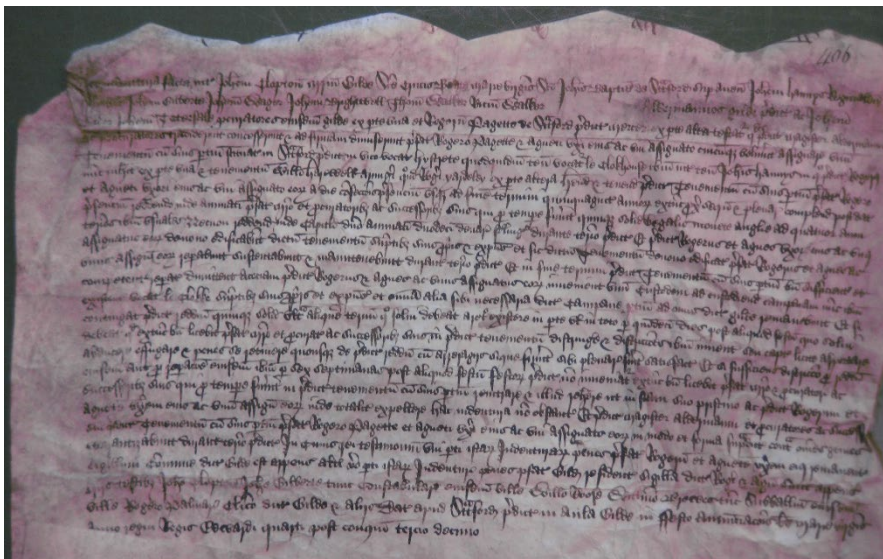


Fig. 2: Rebuilding lease for the Clockhouse 25 March 1473 (SCLA, BRT 1/2/406)

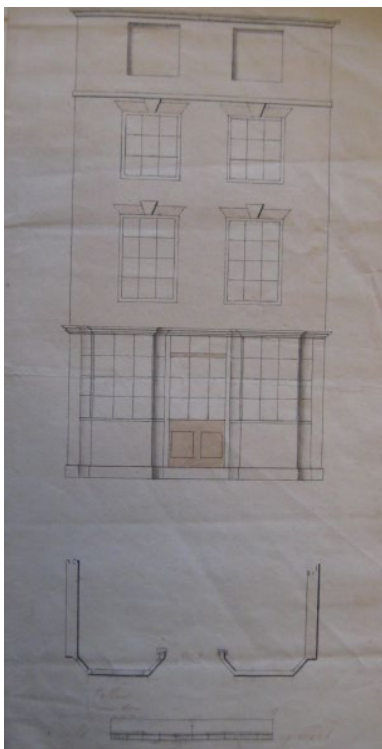


Fig. 3: Elevation proposed for No. 36 High Street, probably of about 1758 (SCLA, BRU 15/18/64).