

SAFFRON WALDEN HISTORICAL JOURNAL

The following article appears by permission and is the copyright of the *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* and the author. Fair dealing for the purposes of private study or non-commercial educational, archival or research purposes is freely allowed, but under no circumstances are articles or illustrations to be reprinted in any other publication, website or other media without permission. All rights reserved. It has not been possible to include all the original illustrations with the articles, but these can be seen in copies deposited at Saffron Walden Town Library.

Enquiries re articles can be sent to saffronwaldenhistory@gmail.com

The History and Architecture of Number 1 Myddylton Place, Saffron Walden

©Zofia Everett

Reprinted (with minor alterations) from *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 6
Autumn 2003



No 1 Myddylton Place. Detail of dragon beam. Photographs ©Jacqueline Cooper.

Saffron Walden's Youth Hostel stood on the corner of Myddylton Place and Bridge Street, once the main trading route and busy thoroughfare leading from London to Cambridge. This location had a great commercial advantage in previous centuries as almost all of the traffic had to pass by the front door of this building. The design of the house not only reveals both the business acumen of the merchant who commissioned it, but also his tastes and aspirations. Although today the house has lost its commercial role and most of its status, it has retained a commanding presence, due to its quality of construction and craftsmanship.

The former youth hostel, like many other ancient buildings, has been greatly altered, constantly threatened by ever-increasing traffic and neglect, yet it is well worth looking at in greater detail. The history of this building is closely linked with the history of the town and the changes in its use were dictated by the changes in fortunes of the town. Wool and agriculture were important for the town from the middle ages, and for centuries remained its life blood, until very recently when the cattle market and corn sales in the Corn Exchange ceased. It was the production of saffron that made the town very wealthy for almost three centuries, and when this crop declined in value, malting and brewing took prominence. The building adapted itself to each change and served its owners in its new capacity. The building has been adapted yet again to serve travelers and tourists as a Youth Hostel [and is now in private hands again].

Bridge Street elevation

The merchant's house on the corner is two storeys high with a steep roof covered with peg-tiles and incorporates what remains of a medieval hall house. It has a massive corner post with folded leaf decoration and moulded capital, crested with fleur-de-lis (the post is now badly decayed and only the top part clearly visible). The overhanging upper storey has a moulded and embattled bressumer carried on the joists and beams of the upper floor.

The house originally faced Bridge Street and on the ground floor two medieval shop window openings are still visible, with their arched heads and decorated spandrels. The mortices in the window posts suggest that a shelf would have been fitted there, so goods could be sold onto the street. Next to the window, is a narrow shop doorway with two small windows above (now blocked). This medieval doorway has a chamfered frame and pilaster buttresses with capitals on the principal bay posts, which are attached by brackets to the jetty above. It was the original entrance to the merchant's house. The first floor windows are of much later date.

Continuing down Bridge Street we come to the bay window of the hall house. The projecting joists above the bay differ from those above the shop windows on the left. They are of poorer quality, with a shallow, awkward curve compared to the original. This part of the building has been altered considerably and the medieval hall inside has been partly rebuilt. Originally it might have been a Wealden house in which the bay window would have been set back in the same way as at No 27 Bridge Street. The difference in the exposed joists of the upper floor and the reconstructed bay window suggest that the upper part of the hall was rebuilt.

The building is extended along Bridge Street by two small 16th century cottages which are timber-framed, and plaster-clad. The doors and

windows are of more modern origins. The floor levels in the cottages are considerably lower than in the main building and much lower than the street level. This might be due to the fact that in previous centuries the slope of the hill was much steeper. The street level was so low that the Madgate Slade ran across the road and there was a bridge in this part of the town, hence the name Bridge End, now Bridge Street. The cottage next to the wagon way was originally part of a late 16th century barn constructed in three bays with a peg-tiled gable roof. It was probably enclosed as a house in the 18th century at the same time as other alterations took place. In the centre of the barn unit is a high wagon way opened up to the eaves. The bay next to it is enclosed and weather boarded in a traditional Essex style. Saffron Walden has several examples of such wagon ways, the most prominent being at the Saffron Hotel and the Old Sun Inn, as well as the one in King Street.

Myddylton Place elevation

The south elevation in Myddylton Place has four bays extending from Bridge Street, and includes a storehouse, which forms an integral part of the property and is constructed in five bays. The walls are closely studded and the studs are of considerable size. The diagonal tension braces in the end bay of the upper floor and the penultimate bay on the ground floor, provide extra strength and stability to the structure. The first floor is jettied and has a moulded bressumer, now defaced. The projecting floor joists are softly rounded and each bay is defined by an extra heavy floor joist and wall post. Under these heavy joists are small curved brackets which rest on slender shafts with moulded capitals. These have a purely ornamental character, rather an unusual detail for a barn as are the 16th century oriel windows in the upper storey. They have projecting roll-moulded and shaped corbel sills and roll-moulded mullions. The window sills inside are also worth noticing for their massive width. On the ground floor there is a tall window with a horizontal window sill (now blocked). A large hook suspended from the ceiling on the inside, suggests that a shutter of a window was hooked up, allowing goods to be sold outside in larger quantities. When in the 18th century the barn was converted into a maltings, a barley shaft was erected in the roof and louvre strips were fixed to the ground floor windows to facilitate good ventilation, which was essential for cooling the barley. These are the only major structural changes in this part of the property.

The closely studded structure is built of the highest quality timber which is richly decorated. This is not an ordinary barn, but a showpiece, an architectural symbol of wealth. The man who built it must have been immensely wealthy and prestige was of great importance to him. Not only his house, but the barn or the storehouse where he conducted his business was built to impress.

Both the exterior and the interior structures seem deceptively simple, yet conceal a sophisticated method of construction. The use of an unusual joint, '*a diminished haunched soffit tenon*' was a new invention and used (as far as it is known) for the first time in the construction of the Kings College Chapel roof around 1510 (Hewett, 1980). This type of joinery also appears in the ground floor construction of the storehouse part of the Myddylton Place building.

This type of joining is an advanced transitional construction of the early 16th century, which together with the exterior stud brace suggest that the building was constructed c.1520/1525. (Gibson, 1994).

Adrian Gibson concluded that it probably took a few years for a new innovation in joining to filter through to the provinces, so if '*a diminished haunched soffit tenon*' was used in Cambridge in 1510, it is logical to assume that it could have been used in Walden ten years later.

Cecil Hewett in *English Historic Carpentry*, writes of 'roofs above vaulting of Kings College Chapel which is supremely important work containing the early examples of tenons with diminished haunches, and they are closely dated'.

The upper floor of the storehouse has exposed rafters showing the principal purlins stiffened with wind braces. A barley shaft and a wooden wheel used to hoist quantities of barley for malting were added in the 18th century. The upper storey of the storehouse joins directly with the living accommodation of the merchant's house. Exceptionally wide oak floorboards can be seen on the landing and in the room above the ground floor. This upper room of the merchant's house was probably used for business. Here the floorboards are laid out diagonally to correspond with the dragon beam directly beneath.

The Hall House

The bay window, evidence of a dais and the elaborately carved recess behind the dais are all that remain of the original features of this hall. The walls have now acquired deal paneling and there is a small fireplace with 17th century Dutch tiles and a far too large deal mantelpiece. Once this space would have been open to the rafters with a large fire burning in the centre of the clay floor. The master of the house would preside behind the table raised above the ground on the dais, with a richly carved and painted screen behind him. He would conduct business and entertain here. Beyond the central fire, at the other end of the hall there was a screen passage and service quarters.

I often hear comments that the building was constructed from ship's timbers. This is most unlikely, as medieval buildings were constructed from green wood. The trees would be transformed into beams on site and

a prefabricated construction put together like a massive jigsaw puzzle. In order that all pieces could be assembled correctly, the carpenter used his own method of marking all the timbers. All the work would have been done by hand and assembled by the use of ropes and pulleys. The sole plate would be put into place and into this all the posts and studs of the building fitted. Once the frame of the building was in position, the floors, windows and walls were fitted and roof tiled.

The green timbers dry out as the house ages and all joints set solid. When it is wet the timber-framed house absorbs moisture and expands, when it is dry the structure contracts. In extreme weather such building can lean considerably, yet never cracks or breaks. It is a most sophisticated method of construction and perfectly suited to human habitation. It is also made from renewable materials and most ecologically sound. Although the method and principles of construction are the same, the end result can have unlimited variations, dictated by the site, the requirements of the owner, the quality and quantity of timber, the skills and imagination of the carpenter, regional styles, new discoveries and developments in building technology. There are many type of joints used in timber framed houses and they provide information about the date of construction or even identify the work of a particular carpenter.

The Abbot's Timber, the King's Men and the Youth Hostel

Most of the surviving timber framed houses in Saffron Walden were constructed at the very end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century, which coincided with major construction works in Cambridge on Kings College Chapel, and the rebuilding of the Church in Saffron Walden. The wood for King's works in Cambridge came from many sources including the timbers from the Abbot of Walden. The King employed the greatest carpenters and master builders of the time, among them Martin Prentice, John Wastell and Simon Clerk. Thomas Clyff, master of works at Kings College recorded in his day book for June 1485 that he had drawn a contract between master builders Simon Clerk and John Wastell and two churchwardens from Saffron Walden to rebuild their church. It is possible to speculate that shrewd local merchants took full advantage of the availability of the Abbot's timber and the first class craftsmen working in the town and commissioned splendid timber-framed houses for themselves. Abbot Sabysforth lost no time in seeing the opportunity, commissioning the magnificent moated residence of St. Aylotts for himself in 1501. It took 300 prime oaks to build and St. Aylotts to this day represents one of the finest examples of timber framed moated houses in the area.

The sophisticated method of construction using a *diminished haunched soffit tenon* in the storehouse at Myddylton Place suggests that the carpenters who constructed the building were the same men who were involved with building of Kings College Chapel. This type of *tenon* was

thought to have been first used in the construction of Kings College Chapel roof in 1510. Is it possible that in fact this type of *tenon* was first used in the storehouse construction in Saffron Walden as a trial run, and then in the roof of Kings College Chapel?

It is probable that the house was commissioned by a prominent merchant and churchwarden, William Myddylton. He certainly knew the king's builders as he must have negotiated the contract for rebuilding of Walden church. If this is the case then his house must have been built before 1493. From 1474 William Myddylton's name appears in deeds to several Hoggs Green properties (now Myddylton Place). The deed from 1493 refers to him as 'William Myddylton who rebuilt his messuage in his lifetime' and 38 years on, this phrase is still repeated in a deed of 1531. Was he the merchant who built No 1 Myddylton Place? If so it must have been done between 1485, when the contract was signed between the king's men and church wardens of Walden, and William's death in 1493.

What would have been sold from the shop in to Bridge Street and what would have been stored in the splendid storehouse? Could it have been saffron for small domestic consumption sold from the shop window in Bridge End, while the storehouse was used to sell saffron in bulk to London merchants and further afield? The roads into Walden were very difficult to negotiate in those days, as Windmill Hill was much steeper and so was the main route from Sparrows Hill. Two streams ran across what is today's High Street and in bad weather it must have been almost impassible, especially with heavy wagons and horses, yet trade flourished and the town became immensely wealthy. The merchant in the house on the main route certainly flourished - his splendid property is lasting evidence of that.

After William Myddylton's death the property eventually was inherited by his daughter Agnes, who died without issue so some of her inheritance went to support Saffron Walden Almshouse. In 1750 the property was owned by Jabez Wyatt, a local malster. It is he who converted the storehouse into maltings and erected low brick buildings (now demolished) in the courtyard for the malting purposes. At his death Elizabeth Wyatt his daughter inherited the property, and by 1789 at her marriage to Atkinson Francis Gibson the property was in the hands of the most prominent local Quaker family of Gibsons. In 1859 Elizabeth Peace Gibson (granddaughter of Atkinson Francis Gibson) married Lewis Fry, a Bristol solicitor, and at her death the property together with many others passed on to the Fry family, which to this day still own some of the houses in and around Walden. All the deeds to numerous Gibsons holdings were with Fry's solicitors in London, but sadly destroyed during the Second World War, and with them an invaluable record of our local history.

In 1921 No 1 Myddylton Place together with two adjoining cottages was purchased by The Ancient Buildings Trust from the estate of Lewis Fry. In

the early part of the war the building was briefly used as a school for evacuees, and in 1944 the Youth Hostel Trust of England and Wales rented the property and purchased it in 1950 for £800. After conversion the Youth Hostel was officially opened in 1957 and served this function until recently.

The building is older than it has been previously assumed and the King's carpenters who worked on King's College Chapel and reconstructed our Parish Church must have also worked on the storehouse at No 1 Myddylton Place. They probably also worked on other prominent timber-framed buildings in Walden from that period.

Saffron Walden is unusual, if not unique in being a small town that preserved and retained a large and important collection of its original ancient documents. For the house historian, the most valuable of these are the Walden deeds (so painstakingly transcribed by Emson), the court rolls and churchwardens' accounts. The existence of such documents allows a unique comparison of architectural details of a building with a documented evidence, giving a fuller information, not only about the specific building, but of the period and people in the town and further afield.

It is a great privilege to live in a town with such an architectural heritage, yet this heritage is too often taken for granted and neglected. The ever increasing road and airport expansions and insensitive planning destroys large swathes of precious heritage yearly. Even if the buildings themselves are preserved, the surrounding area is being eroded, and as a result the buildings lose their scale, impact and character. Walden has lost almost all of its large mature gardens and ancient trees. This erosion is sometimes slow, yet relentless and with it the history of people and places disappear forever. We must become informed and aware of the value of our built heritage, as its value is far greater than its commercial worth. The nation which does not know or value its past has no future.

Notes

Kings College Archives, Account Books 1509-29; Thomas Clyff's Day Books.
23 March, 23 Hen. VIII, 1531/32.

Walden Deeds, 8 June, 20 Edw. III 1346.

Saffron Walden Census Returns; Poor Rate Books; Emson, Transcripts of Saffron Walden Deeds; Churchwardens' accounts (ERO D/P 15/2 1439-90) (Saffron Walden Town Library).

Walden Court Rolls (ERO ref D/Dby M8-10 Court Manor of Walden Court Rolls 1461-1490; D/Dby M11-17 Manor of Walden Court Rolls 1490-1521).

Documents relating to listed properties in Saffron Walden (Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings).

Barron, C. M. & Sutton, A. F. (eds), *Medieval London Widows 1300-1500* (1994).

Bindoff, H. E., *Government and Society* (1961).

Brunskill R. W., *Timber Buildings in Britain* (1985).

No 1 Myddylton Place – *Saffron Walden Historical Journal* No 6 (2003)

Colvin, H.M. (ed.), *The History of King's Works Vol III 1485-1660 (Pt I)*.
Colvin, H. M., *A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects 1600-1840* (1995).
Emmison, F. G., *Essex Wills* (1990).
Everett, M. J., *Saffron Walden and the English Civil War* (1995).
Fitz-Hugh Terrick, V. H., *The Dictionary of Genealogy* (1985).
Gibson A., *Revised List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest Uttlesford*.
Dept of National Heritage (1994).
Harris, R., *Discovering Timber-Framed Buildings* (1978).
Harvey, J., *English Medieval Architects: a biographical dictionary down to 1550* (1984).
Hewett, C, *Church Carpentry* 1982.
Hewett, C., *English Historic Carpentry* (1980).
Marillier, H., *C. Handbook to Teniers Tapestries* (1932).
Monteith, D., *Saffron Walden and its Environs* (unpub Ph.D thesis, Leicester, 1958).
R.C.H.M.E *The Moated House of St Aylotts, Saffron Walden, Essex* (1995).
Rowntee, C. B., *Saffron Walden: Then and Now* (1952).
Stenning, D., *Timber Framed Shops 1300-1600* (1984).

Note: This article is based on a booklet by the same author, copies of which with further illustrations can be seen at Saffron Walden Town Library.