

Timber framed buildings in Elstow

Part one - 17 Bunyan's Mead

Many villagers may be wondering why builders working on number 17 Bunyan's Mead have ripped out all the massive timbers which were only put in two years ago. Those timbers were certainly substantial enough to support this building and the carpentry work had been done competently enough, so why did they stop work and why was the house left boarded up for so long before work resumed?

Well, it seems that - incredibly - the owner of two years ago hadn't applied for planning permission, despite the fact that this is a listed building! So he had set about simply re-building, doing what was functional, rather than what is legally required these days - restoration of the property back to its original form of construction and design. Number seventeen Bunyan's Mead is in fact a 15th century "Wealden" house, so called because this type of timber-framed building was designed in The Weald, in the Sussex - Kent area.

As soon as they discovered what was happening, Bedford Borough served a planning enforcement order. Planning officers turned up on site and one of our local residents, who was doing some work for the owner was told that he had to stop work immediately or be arrested! Needless to say, he complied. Thankfully, so did the owner, which was a relief, because I am told that the owner of no. 17 at that time was the same man who a few years earlier, when told by planners that he couldn't do what he wanted to a listed pub, simply demolished it!

After the enforcement notice had been served, Number 17 was left alone until earlier this year, when it was sold. Its new owner (can anyone tell me *who* this is?) seems determined to do the job properly, as they have employed specialist companies to carry out authentic restoration.

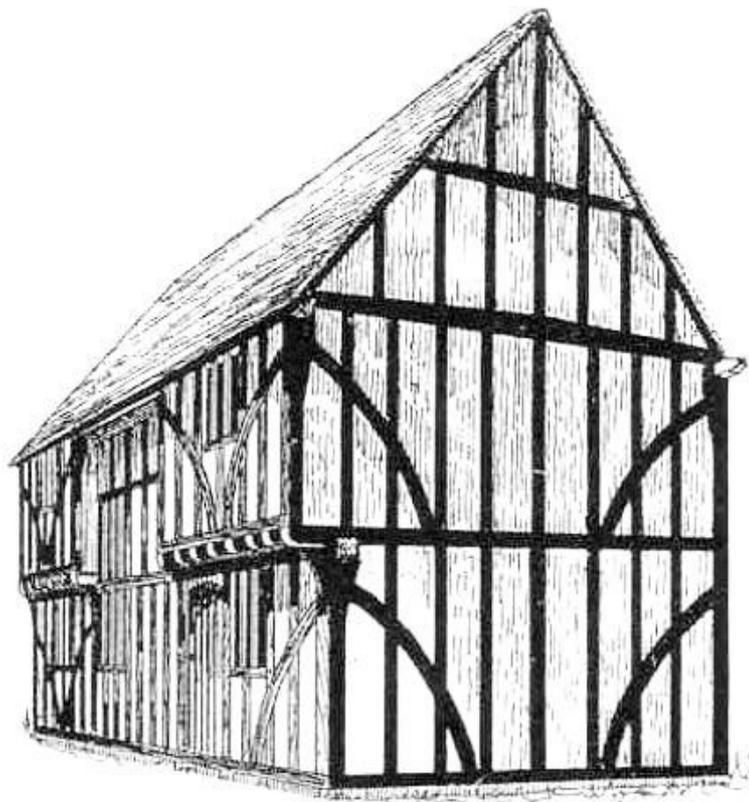
The first job of the new contractor was to rip out all those huge timbers which had been put in two years ago. It seems that not only was the design of that timber structure incorrect, the timbers they used were of the wrong size (they were too bulky) *and* were of green, instead of old matured, oak.

It has been fascinating to watch these craftsmen carefully reconstructing the front and side of the house, using the same techniques, materials and joints as would have used 600 years ago. They do, of course, use modern tools!

Firstly they replaced the major structural timbers - the sill beams, which sit on the floor. Into those sills were slotted the vertical posts and then, on top of them, the horizontal plates which support the first floor and roof. Although these are big heavy lumps of timber, the joints between

sills and posts, posts and plates are simple old fashioned mortise and tenons, with pegs put right through the joints to ensure they stay tightly in place. They then added the more minor pieces of timber - non-load bearing posts and diagonal trusses - the latter would have involved some rather more challenging joinery, with angled mortise and tenon joints. Over the first two weeks of August, they have been slotting (into grooves in the sill beams and plates) the vertical poles for the horizontal wattles - strips of wood, usually Hazel, which are just thin enough to be flexible. These wattles need no nails to hold them place because, just as would have been done in the 15th century, they woven tightly in and out of the pole supports. The next stage will be the application of daub - a medieval plaster which can be made of various combinations; clay or mud, sand, cow dung and straw. The interior partition walls will be repaired in similar fashion.

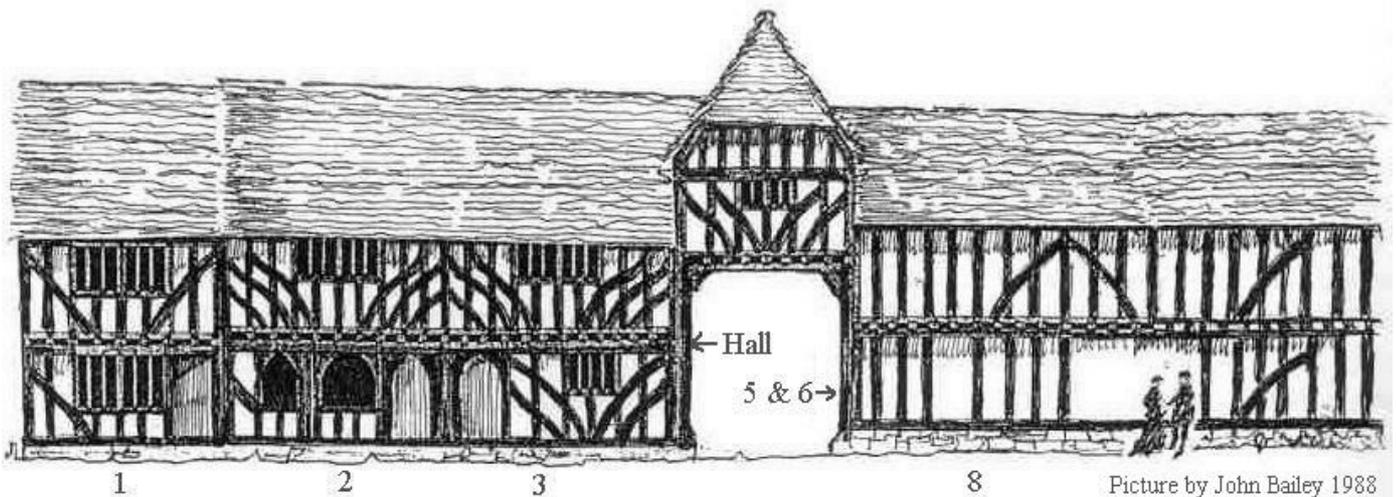
This is how the house originally looked and how it should look again, once the present restoration is complete;



Drawing by John M Bailey

As well as no 17, Elstow has a wealth of timber-framed buildings and I have enough information to be able to write a short series of articles for this magazine - if anyone *wants* me to?

Timber Framed Buildings in Elstow Part Two. 1- 8 Bunyan's Mead



One could be forgiven for assuming that all of this terrace was built at the same time, as a single structure - its appearance certainly gives the impression that it could have been a large inn, its central archway an entrance for coaches. But all these ideas were dispelled a few years ago, when timber-framed buildings expert John Bailey began surveying Elstow's buildings in 1976. By looking in detail at the methods of construction, John was able to tell; not only when most of the buildings were erected but, also, how they would have originally appeared and, in some cases, what purposes they were built for.

Numbers 1 to 8 are in fact several, separate, buildings. No. 1 was built as a free-standing, 2 bay structure. John Bailey (now, sadly, deceased) did not record exactly when it was built but, if free-standing, it presumably pre-dates nos. 2 & 3, so is at least mid 13th century. Its back door was originally opposite the front door and the stairway was in its north-east corner. Its windows were the same height as today, but both were wider - 6 lights instead of 3. Only 3 metres wide and even less deep, the purpose of this curious little building is uncertain; a workshop, cottage or guest accommodation for the Abbey.

2/3 Bunyan's Mead is late 13th / early 14th, century and comprises 2 bays, jettied (i.e. overhanging) the road. As can be seen in John's drawing, there were originally two independent front doors. Unlike no. 1, their street frontages are elaborately embellished with 17 ogee braces, a very uncommon feature in Bedfordshire. The northernmost bay (no. 2) had two shop windows on the ground floor, similar in shape to those of Moot Hall. The upper floor of both bays had 6-light, diamond pane, mullioned windows - not as tall as the modern 3 light units which now cut crudely into the curves of the ogee braces! No. 3's downstairs front window was of four-lights, located centrally above the ogee braces - unlike the off-centre, 3 light, taller, modern window. No. 3 was extended at the rear, probably in the late 14th century, with the addition of a hall (a two-storey height building having no upper floor). Only the blackened timbers of the roof of that hall remain, the walls having been destroyed by fire and replaced by the present brickwork. This building is thought to have been, at one time, a hostelry named "The Bell"

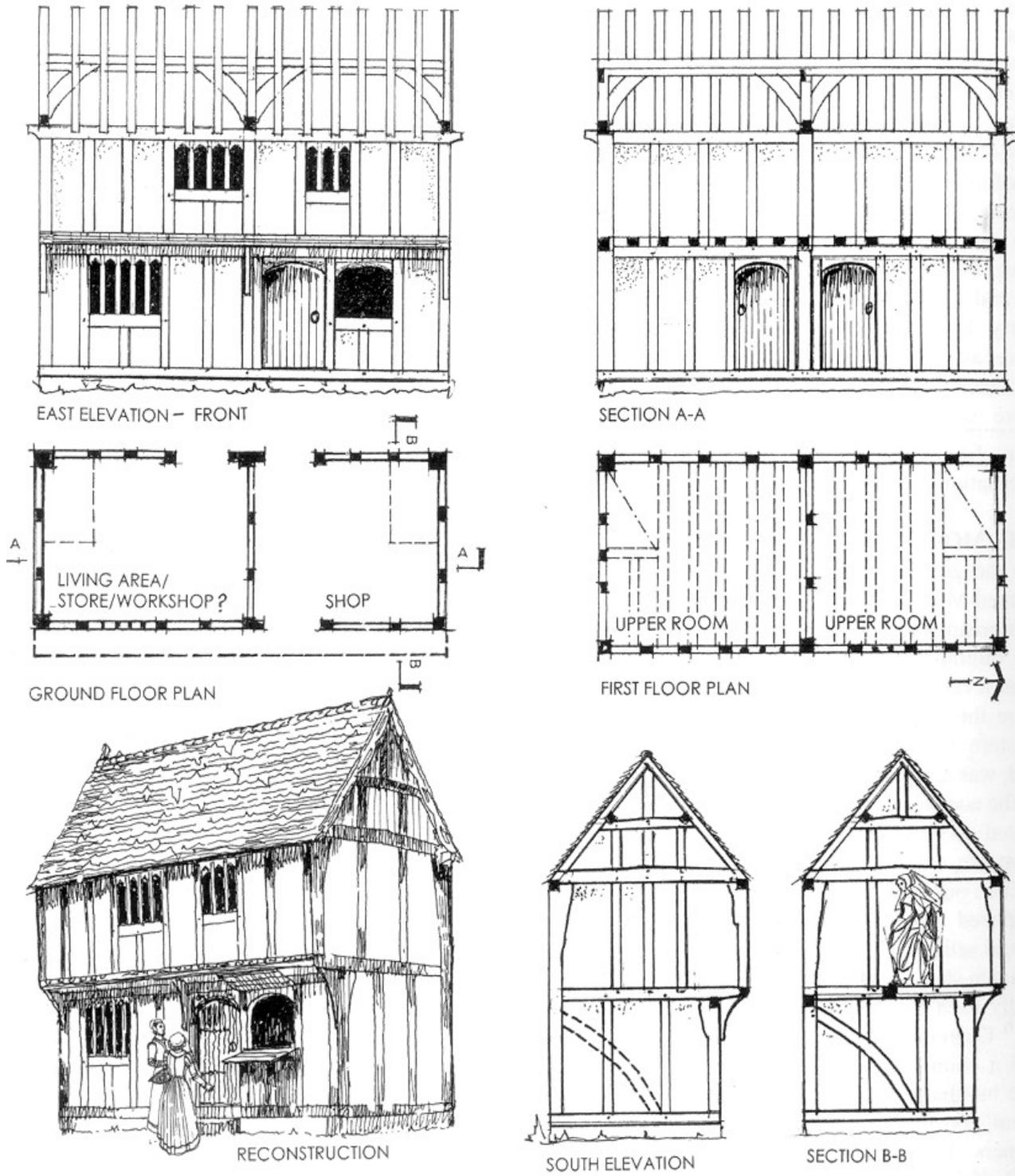
No. 8's original entrance is now no. 5's front door. The original building was a 2 bay, 13th century hall, standing at right angles to the road. This was considerably altered in the 16th century, when an upper floor was added, its east and west ends removed and replaced by the present east and west wings. Some decorative wall-painting from the very early 17th century survives in the entrance hall of no 5, partly hidden behind late 17th C wood panelling. This room may have been a small inn called the White Lion.

John Bailey did not date the archway (or 'Jetty' as it is locally known). Access to it is from the 16th century west wing of no. 8 and its street face has medieval brickwork under the rendering, yet is decorated with the same style ogee braces as the 13/14th century on nos. 2 & 3. John's drawing shows the original street window was more shallow and the gable's surface was not tiled. So, why an archway? Not for coaches - this was merely a way of adding a room, without blocking access to the 2 halls behind.

Timber Framed buildings of Elstow - part three. 204 High Street

Although now named 'West End Farmhouse', this building is still referred to by many long-time Elstow residents as 'Charley Prudden's cottage'. It is, in fact, not one building but three and may, at one point, have been attached to other, now long-gone, properties to the west.

Building one. The oldest part is the front, east-facing, building, which abuts the High Street. This is of typical medieval construction, consisting of two bays, originally separated by stud partitions. On the west side of the building, each bay had its own back door, indicating that these were two separate properties.

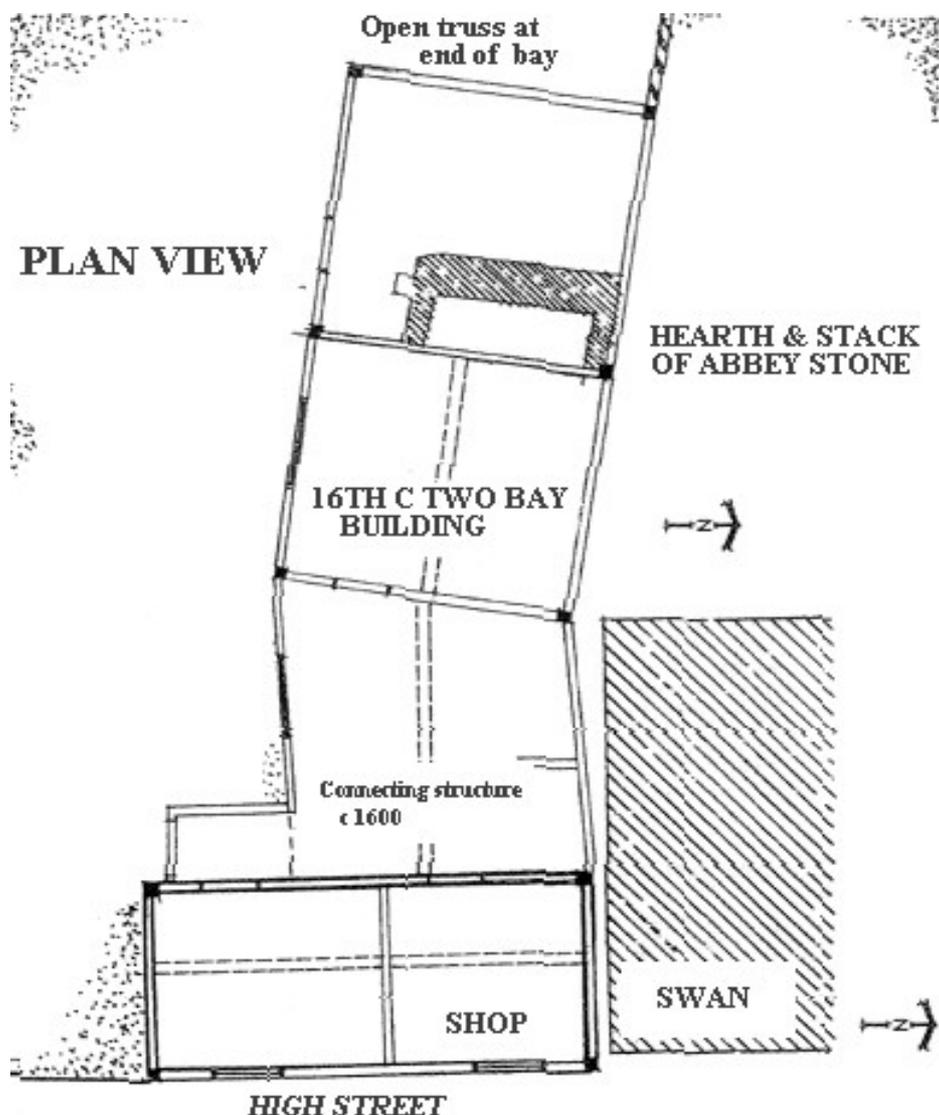


On their east side, the two bays are now only slightly jettied over the main road but, originally, the first floor would have projected 1/2 metre out over the ground floor's front wall. (So, the

downstairs front wall would then have been almost in line with the present-day downstairs wall of the neighbouring Swan inn.) The front wall was, at some time, moved forward, presumably to increase the interior ground floor space, and so is now located right up against the back of the bressumer (the large horizontal beam supporting the jetty). The bressumer, as well as being moulded, has castellated detail running along its length - a somewhat unusual feature in Bedfordshire. The roof is similar to that of Elstow's Moot Hall, being of clasp-purlin form. The front wall studs are widely spaced which, together with the ornate bressumer, suggests that the front of the building was designed to incorporate a shop front. During the 1999 restoration, the northern bay was indeed found to have a doorway, opening onto the road, and above it was a moulded, carved, two centred spandrel panel, similar to those above Moot Hall's doors. Beside that door was a shop window, which appears to have once had a similar spandrel above it. This bay's rear door (in what would then have been the exterior western wall of the building) also had a similar spandrel. As can be seen in the drawing, the shop door and window are very similar in layout and design to those of Moot Hall and both ground floor bays are of similar size to Moot Hall's six shop bays.

The southern bay had no front door, only the one at the rear. During restoration, in the front wall's northernmost wattle and daub panel, a section of black and white wall painting, dated to about 1600, was found. As this was in poor condition, it was not practical to leave it in situ so it was donated to Bedford Museum. There is little evidence to suggest what the southern bay was used for - it may have been a workshop, store or accommodation

Upstairs, neither bay had rear nor end windows - each had only one window, in the east-facing wall.





Building two. The south-facing building to the rear, was originally a 16th century, single-story building, which stood completely apart from the jettied medieval roadside building. (The two properties were joined together in about 1600.) This building, made of re-claimed timbers, had two bays, which have been much altered over the centuries - the biggest change being the addition of an upper floor over the whole of the eastern bay and half of the western bay. The western end has an open truss, suggesting that the property was erected abutting a pre-existing building, beyond where the present (timber-clad) part of the property now stands. The rafters of the western bay appear to be sooted, suggesting that there was no chimney in the original structure. A stone chimney was constructed using materials from the ruined section of the Abbey, so is post-1539. This was built into the eastern end of the west bay, with a fireplace opening into the eastern bay. A brick chimney was later built inside, and on top of, the stone one. The roof is of clasped sided purlin construction, with principal rafters reducing above the collars and substantial wind braces rising, from the principal rafters, up to the collars.

All the doors and windows were in the southern wall of the building. Some evidence of doorway joints were found in the northern wall plate but, as that was re-claimed timber those joints probably date from its use in its previous building. It seems highly unlikely, given the age and close proximity of the Swan inn next door, that there was ever any door or window in the northern side of this building. All the walls in this building are now in-filled with brickwork, but were originally wattle and daub. There is little evidence as to the original use of this building, but it may have been domestic.

Building 3. The 16th century rear building and the medieval front building were joined together in about 1600, by a timber-framed two story construction. Until the 1999 restoration, the western bay of the rear building had been used as a farm barn and the whole of the rest of the combined buildings as a farm house for several centuries.

Timber Framed Buildings in Elstow - Part Four. “The Green Corner” & “Pilgrim House” (formally “The Chequer”)

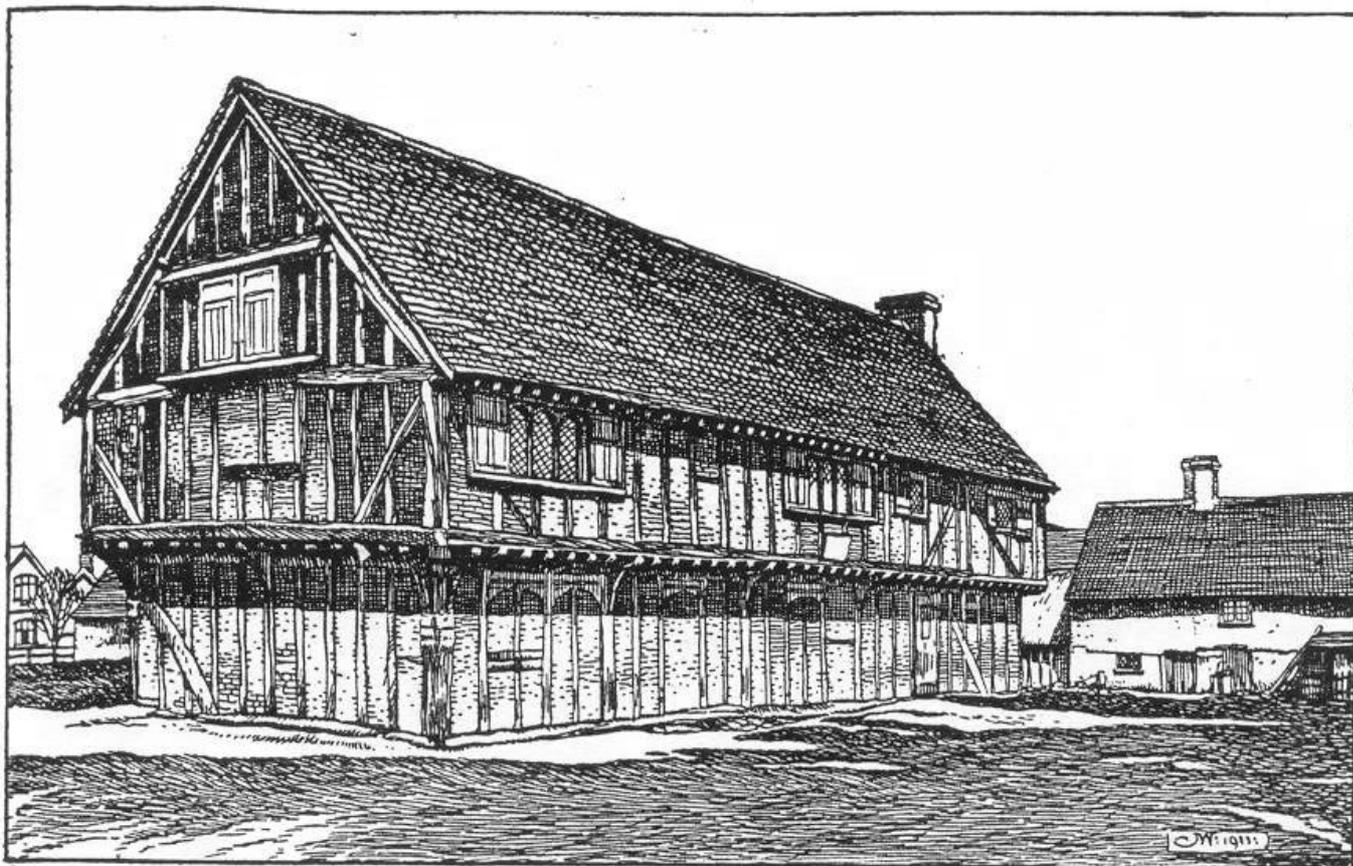


The Green Corner sits on the junction of High Street and Church End lane. This is the surviving section of a once two bay 15th century hall house (a house having no upstairs floor). The other, northern, bay stood where the present day Pilgrim House is now. Quite why almost half of the original building was demolished and replaced by a brick-built house is not known. One possibility is that the northern half of the hall house was damaged by fire - there is certainly some smoke blackening on the roof timbers of The Green Corner where it adjoins Pilgrim House - although this may be from the time before the hall house had a chimney.

I have, so far, found only one illustration of the rear of the northern section of the hall house, viewed from the green. This drawing, apparently copied from a much earlier illustration, shows what appear to be two (possibly three) back doors, suggesting that the building was divided into at least two dwellings.

Most of the walls of The Green Corner are covered, outside and in, by render or plasterwork, so it has not been possible to discover exactly what the house looked like when first constructed but it probably looked similar to those on the opposite side of the High Street. For those into the technical details, The Green Corner's roof is of crown post construction, with posts which are

square and plain. Braces run down from the posts to the tie beams and there are upward braces from the posts to the purlin. There is evidence of curving braces up to the underside of the hall's



central truss. Basmead Manor, in north Beds has a crown post roof of almost identical design. *Moot Hall, viewed from the Green, with the rear of the Hall House on the right.*

Quite what the purpose and use of The Green Corner building originally was is not know - most likely it was a dwelling. The northern bay - where Pilgrim House is now - was known as The Chequer and is thought to have been, at least in part, an inn. It is believed that there are three wells under the floors of Pilgrim House (although I am not certain of this, as they were all concreted over in the 20th century) so it seems likely that beer was brewed here.

As a sidenote, John Bunyan's grandfather - Thomas - lived the last part of his life next door to The Chequer, in a similar (but smaller) cottage, located where Pilgrim House now has its driveway.

When the Abbey was surrendered, all of its Elstow properties went to the King (Henry VIII), who then gave them to Sir Humphrey Radclyffe. There are few records of the subsequent ownership of The Green Corner until its incarnation in the mid 1900s as Mr and Mrs Cave's home and shop but there is a wealth of data on The Chequer. Sold by Radclyffe in the mid 1500s to William Winchester, The Chequer then passed through twelve different owners until 1806, when Edward Chapman demolished that part of the hall house's structure and built the present red brick house. Even then, the two dwellings remained attached, sharing a timber-framed wall between the front rooms of the ground floor. At the time of the re-build, Chapman's tenant was a Charles Berrill. In 1824, ownership passed to an Elizabeth Denyer, who then married her tenant, Charles Berrill, and moved in with him. The new brick house had three further owners, until 1871, when it was purchased at auction by the Whitbread Estate.

The Green Corner (and also the Swan pub) were also not part of the estate Whitbread purchased from the Hillersdens and - unusually for this part of Elstow - neither The Green Corner nor The Swan have ever been owned by Whitbread.

Timber framed buildings in Elstow – Part five. Moot Hall

Moot Hall is a medieval, timber-framed building, believed to have been built on the orders of the Abbess of Elstow Abbey, during the 15th century. It was known throughout most of its history simply as “The green house”.



The original 4-bay building provided four shops on the ground floor and a court-room above, in which the Abbess held Elstow’s manor court hearings. (These were the fore-runner of magistrates’ courts). They may also have used that room as a village meeting place, as well as a place in which to receive visitors to the Abbey. Moot Hall was used during the Abbey’s annual, four day, May fairs, probably as the office where traders could come to hire a stall or pitch and then to pay, to the Abbey’s steward, taxes on all the goods they had sold. Elstow Abbey’s fairs were large events, attracting traders and buyers from all the surrounding counties, and generated approximately a quarter of the Abbey’s annual income.

Whilst now jettied on only three sides, before being extended to the east, the building was probably jettied on all four sides. (‘Jettied’ – where the upper floor of a building projects over the lower floor.)

The original medieval roof is largely intact. The trusses consist of arch-braced tie-beams, with collars above, linking the principal rafters halfway up and supported by unornamented central posts, flanked by sloping struts. It is a double-framed roof, in which the collars only occur in the trusses and the two purlins connect directly to the rafters at the level of the collars. (“Clasp-purlin” design.) The purlins are reinforced by curved wind-braces. Above the purlins, the principal rafters are reduced to the thickness of common rafters. As is usual in medieval work, there is no ridge-pole. The later additional section of roof has thinner, straight, braces but the studs are at about the same intervals as in the earlier part and so marries well with the original.

Extension. Some time after the original construction, a fifth bay was added to the east end, together with a large chimney stack. This was probably constructed after 1539 (the year in which Elstow Abbey was surrendered to Henry VII, under his Abolition of Monasteries Act) either by the Hervey or Radclyff family.

The extension provided two new rooms, one on the ground floor, one above, each with a fireplace, suggesting that their purpose was a ‘hospitium’ (guest house) for high status visitors to the Abbey.

The extension also enabled the number of shops to be increased to six. Each shop had a separate door and a broad window, with a four-centred arch above. These ‘windows’ may have been wooden panels, which would be let down and used as counters when the shops were open. Most of the vertical stud timbers from the partitions between the shop units remain and clearly bear nail marks, indicating that they were covered in wattle and daub. Mortises and slots in the ceiling and floor beams show where other vertical studs and the wattle’s upright poles were located.

The fourth bay had originally contained a separate room, with an east-west ladder stairway to the upper courtroom. The external door to the fourth bay was probably at the southern end of the east wall. That original external wall, including its wattle and daub, still survives, now forming the partition between the building’s fourth and fifth bays.

Probably also at the time of the extension; a cellar was formed under the fourth bay; a north-south staircase was erected; an Elizabethan doorway (now removed) inserted into the north wall where the eastern-most shop stood and; the wattle and daub nogging was removed from the external frame and replaced with brick infill.

At some point, the window in western wall was moved to a higher position.

Restoration. During 1950, Bedfordshire County Council restored Moot Hall to its original medieval form, the west wall's window was moved back down but the slightly later external brick-nogging was retained. The medieval roof was also left largely intact, but protected by forming a new outer roof, with the new rafters being laid over the top of the originals.

English Medieval market houses, with shops below and a long chamber above, are rare. Two other examples survive in Buckinghamshire - at Long Crendon and West Wycombe. A similar example, but of later date and differing design, is also to be found in Bedfordshire - in Leighton Buzzard.

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