

## Henley-on-Thames

**Address: 93-95 Bell Street**

**Grade II listed:** Listing entry: ‘Early C18<sup>th</sup> façade of stucco. No 95 has altered C19<sup>th</sup> shop front’

Behind the bland façade with its C18<sup>th</sup> fenestration hides a timber framed building of outstanding quality. It was probably larger, extending further to the south (left), where an 1822 brick dwelling, built by J. Ovey, now stands. Its northernmost bay cuts across the boundary line between Henley and Bensington, shown on the 1878 OS map below. It was subdivided into two dwellings, the larger, No 95, becoming a bakery, which was documented in the Beating of the Bounds by 1777, and continued in this use into the early C 20<sup>th</sup> ( see 1911 Census Returns) From c.1984 until c.2005 it was ‘Kingston Antiques’.

**Dendro dated in 2016 by Dr. Dan Miles, Oxford Dendro Laboratory, to 1436-44**

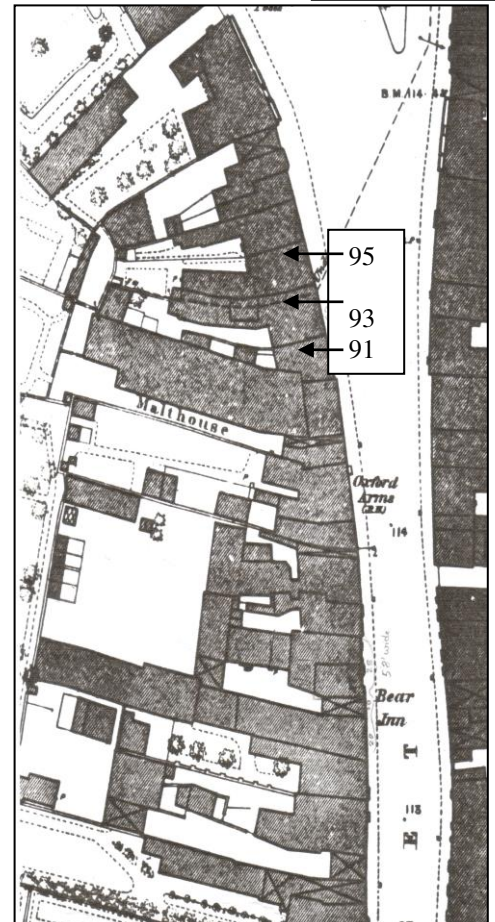
1878 OS map



No. 93

No 95

Description from the **Beating of the Bounds** in 1777:  
*...up Bell Lane, across Henley Street to a house in occupation of ... Edward Toomer, baker, and now Fuller, baker and from then through the window on the right of the door and then through the oven taking in a garden....*



The dotted line which crosses Bell Street just above No.95 clearly goes through the building itself. Adjoining No. 93 on the south is a large malt house, which cuts into the rear corner of No.93. Only the north wall of it remains forming the south garden wall of No. 93. The position of the bdgs. in relation to each other on this restricted site suggests a possibly former single ownership of the three with the maltings at the rear indicating a prosperous business. – Deeds of 1752 with regard to the adjoining No. 91 Bell Street refer to ‘one messuage, one malthouse and one garden’; i.e. already a separate property at that time.

84. It is said that milk was delivered by oxcart belonging to Leonard Noble of Harpsden Court Farm. This photograph of c. 1911 shows the cart passing across the old town boundary where Bell Street changes to Northfield End. The shop, at this time belonging to baker, Alfred Fowler, had been a baker's since at least the 1790s (see plate 111).



Circa 1911 milk delivery wagon from Harpsden Court Farm to Allen Fowler's Bakery at No. 95 Bell Street.

Antiques

*Richard J Kingston*



95 BELL STREET  
HENLEY-ON-THAMES  
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June 1984

Last commercial use of No. 95 before it became once again a principal residence, as built by a wealthy member of the town's burgess elite in the mid 15<sup>th</sup> century.

## Historic Background

This house belongs to a group of some five/six buildings at the very northern end of the former North Street (between the top of New Street and where the Marlow Road forks right). All have some characteristics in common; they occupy a wide frontage between 14m & 16m, over twice the width of the traditional burgage plot<sup>1</sup>. Three have been dendro dated to the first half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century; the other two have similar characteristics. All are constructed of high quality oak framing, two of them<sup>2</sup> still demonstrate the wealth of their owners through high quality carpentry by the lavish use of elaborately moulded posts, wall plates, transverse beams and braces – a very labour intensive as well as wasteful use of the raw material. All of this is now hidden inside, much of it behind later plaster and substituted by brick work. Since the owners would have been keen to demonstrate their wealth and standing it is highly unlikely that the outsides were not still more conspicuous originally.

The early 15<sup>th</sup> century was a time when the economy appeared to be reviving from the worst ravages of the mid 14<sup>th</sup> century Black Death and subsequent plagues. One consequence of the dramatic reduction in population was that the established grain trade through Henley to London was superseded by the export trade in wool<sup>3</sup>. Not only because fewer people needed less grain, but also because the very labour intensive ploughing, tilling and harvesting of the land had to be substituted by grazing animals. This needed far fewer agricultural labourers

<sup>1</sup> Standard burgage plot identified in Henley 1 ½ perches equals 7.50 m, VCH XVI, p 33

<sup>2</sup> Nos 74/76/78, Nos 77/79 & 81, and Nos 93/95

<sup>3</sup> Wool Trading VCH Vol XVI, p. 82

and the wool export brought land owners, great and small, a share of the profits the monastic establishments had benefited from for centuries.

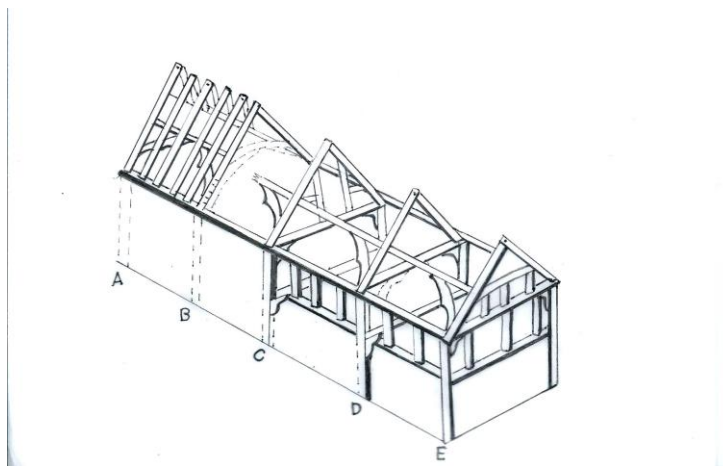
Dr. Robert Peberdy<sup>4</sup> in his thesis on Henley highlights the more than average influx of **New Burgesses** into the town in the first two decades of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. In his table No 6.3 the recorded entrants are 37 between 1400-09 and 36 between 1410-1419; then it reduces to an average of between 17 to 23 per decade.

Who were these new members of the town's elite? <sup>5</sup> The names of John Elmes and John Devene are among them; they sound familiar as together they are documented in 1445 as acquiring 'a building and vacant plot' to the 'east of the churchyard.

The vacant plot is very likely the site where the imposing three-storey 'Chantry House' was built soon after. It adjoins the oldest part of the Red Lion – there are still blocked doorways between the two. The lucrative wool trade down river and the import of luxury goods up river may have been the reason for the speculative construction of this impressive mercantile building. It had a trading floor with elegant exterior looking towards the town, open fronted storage accommodation at river level below, external stair cases from both the river and town level, several chambers for travelling merchants and lock up rooms/offices ? for their luxury goods and a large storage loft above.

The fact that by 1552 the Devene family sold it as the 'School House' shows that the speculative commercial venture had failed, as the most important trading goods downriver were one again grain and timber, neither of them needing a grand trading floor nor attic storage accommodation.

It is against this background of new, wealthy burgesses profiting from the upswing in the wool trade, that one must consider the construction 'with no expenses spared' of the four bay hall and chamber wing, which survives of the 1430s town house. This must have been larger, as some essentials are missing, e.g no sign of a kitchen nor of a passageway to the rear of the house. - At the former 'Bear Inn' a tall entrance archway exists allowing access to stabling, storage and the formerly detached kitchen. At No 76 the original cross passage at the lower end of the medieval hall (built in 1405) is still there. No.73 also has a large archway entrance to the rear. No house could function without this essential access to stables, storage and other services at the back.



Attempted reconstruction drawing of two-bay chamber wing ( C – E) and adjoining hall with arch braced central truss, but without the smoke blackening typical for a medieval hall. This confirms the existence of an early chimney stack for this hall.

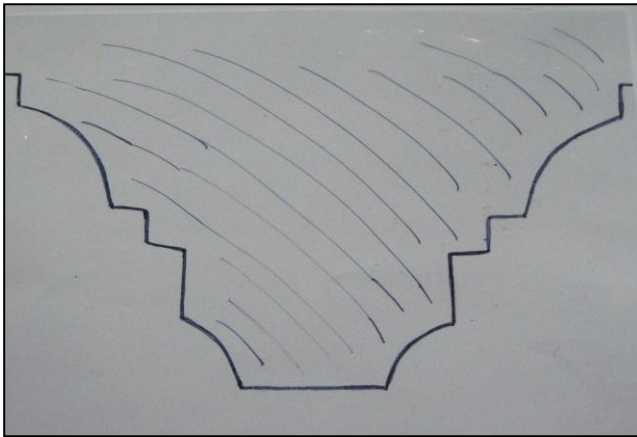
<sup>4</sup> 'The Economy, Society, and Government of a Small Town in Late Medieval England: A study of Henley-on-Thames from c. 1300 to c. 1540' (Leicester Univ. PhD thesis 1994)

<sup>5</sup> VCH Vo. XVI pp 82 and 83 on significance of wool trade and other Henley merchants



## Architectural Details

- A timber framed building of four bays, 3 perches (14 m) street frontage.
- Storeyed with upper chambers and attics; originally only above the 2 northern bays
- Queen strut trusses with side purlins, shown in the closed north gable truss.
- The central trusses have stub collars tenoned into two tall queen struts, allowing uninterrupted access throughout the attic – an alteration once the open hall had been floored over.
- Cusped wind braces between principals and purlins
- An arch braced truss – now removed – in the attic of No. 93. Was it an open hall or a grand, two-bay first floor chamber ?
- Impressive double hollow chamfer mouldings throughout on all levels
- The ground floor rooms/bays of No 95 were one open space, still shown by its posts from which knee braces rise to the transverse ceiling beam – all moulded with double hollow chamfers; a space built to impress.
- The first floor chambers at No. 95 retain v. faint traces of painted wall decorations



Above: Double hollow chamfer mouldings in central transverse beam, wall posts and braces of the ground floor room at No. 95.

Below left: Attic of No. 95. View south towards partition wall with No. 93.

Below right: Cusped wind brace. These exist throughout the four bays of both attic spaces.

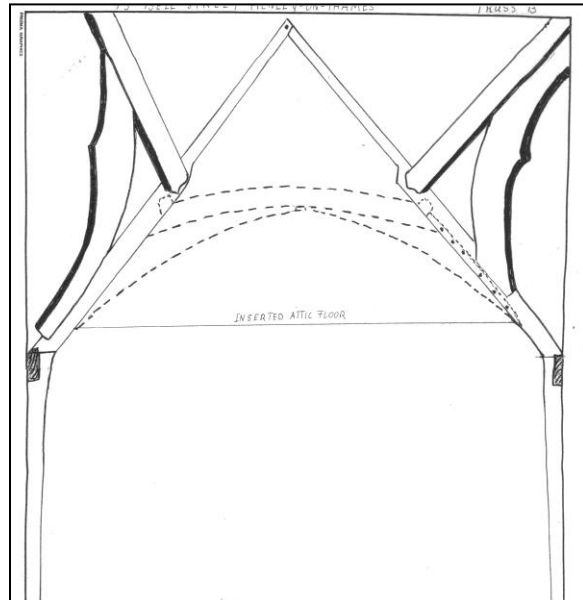
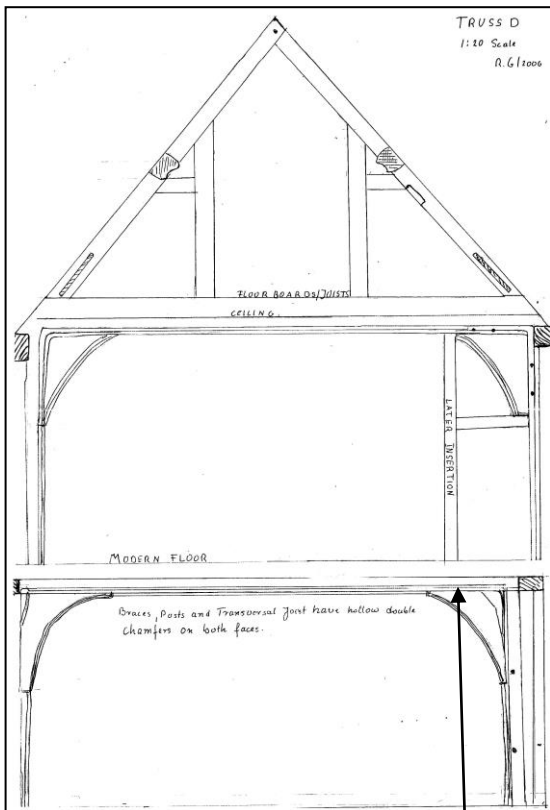


Above left: view of north attic looking south

Right: roof with cusped wind brace



View of north end gable wall in attic of what is now No.95. NB no other equivalent of the original framing of a cross or end wall survives in the building.



Reconstruction drawing of central arch brace truss in what is now No. 93. But was it a two-bay hall or a first floor chamber?  
(Scale 1:20, reduced) © R. Gibson 2006

Section through central truss and wall frame of what is now No. 95, looking south. The double sided moulding of the ground floor transverse beam, braces and wall posts shows that this was always one large, impressive room. (for details of mouldings see above)

Scale 1:20 - reduced - © R. Gibson 2006

### **Conclusion drawn from the architectural evidence:**

An impressive building, although not all of it seems to survive. No doubt the outside would have been as highly decorated, if not more so, as the lavish interior mouldings amply demonstrate. The hollow chamfer moulding details indicate a mid C15<sup>th</sup> building date, now confirmed by dendro dates of 1431-40. The lack of smoke blackening in the two open arch-braced bays of what is now No. 93 indicates that this building always had a chimney stack, as well as an upper floor chamber and attics. There was either a hall, open from floor to apex, or an impressive first floor chamber with central arch braced truss, both very probably heated from the stack located in the south gable wall.

With its four bays, measuring 3 perches, built along the street frontage it shows that there was no lack of space outside the planned medieval town, where 1 ½ perches burgage plots were the norm. What appears to be missing is an access to the back, absolutely essential to the functioning of its users whether commercial or residential, or both. - The scale and detail of expensive mouldings throughout demonstrates that it had a wealthy owner/builder; very likely one of the merchants who profited from the burgeoning wool trade of that period.

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