

## Discussion and summary on building dates, alterations and additions

### at 'THE BEAR', 77/79 & 81 Bell Street, Henley-on-Thames



Rear yard of 'The Bear', looking east towards the carriage archway and Bell Street. On the left is the medieval hall or detached kitchen located behind No. 81. It has been dendro dated to 1438. When it was built it would have looked 0.40 m (16") taller; the ground level having risen by that much over the past 570 years. On the left is the long range, which retains an impressive first floor parlour. The lodging ranges, as described in the inn holder's inventory of 1683 are located along the street frontage under four tall gables. The one visible here is described as 'The Chamber over the Gatehouse'.

The four impressive street front gabled bays were built over a period of time. There is clear evidence that Bays I and II have separate wall frames; the present opening between them shows the two separate wall plates side by side. The same is true for Bays II and III; here one can see the separate wall frames in the loft, that of Bay III being slightly taller, but a door – now blocked - connected both chambers, another sign of joint ownership.

Bays III and IV belong to what is now No. 81; both front gables have attractive, canted bays, something usually associated with the 17<sup>th</sup> C. The building is raised over a basement and the ground floor shops were reached by a couple of steps. Its exposed framing consists of mostly narrow timbers and long diagonal braces with exception of the dividing wall between the two ground floor rooms, where the timbers are of different dimensions and may be re-used from an earlier building. This front range clearly represents a 17<sup>th</sup> C. alternate rebuilding phase, an updating of an earlier, very probably medieval building. Interestingly the detached rear range of 1438 was retained, but the c.1 foot gap between the two, covered by a short roof extension, is a sign of their different dates and purposes.

The chambers of Bays I and II have timbers of large size and good quality scantling; both have curved wind braces, cambered tie beams and collars supported by a single crown strut and are very similar to the trusses and roof structure of the large upper chamber behind Bay I. These are Bays Va to V d. However, there is a substantial difference in floor level between the front and long rear range, suggesting again a difference in building dates despite the apparent similarities in construction. (NB the attic above Bay I has not been accessed and may have a different roof structure. From what one can see in the first floor room it seems to have a side purlin roof like the others bays)



1<sup>st</sup> Floor chamber, Bay I a on plan.  
Tie beam and collar only visible



Attic above Bays II a & b, with the crown strut rising from the here hidden tie beam to the cambered collar. The purlins are clasped between principal rafter & collar.



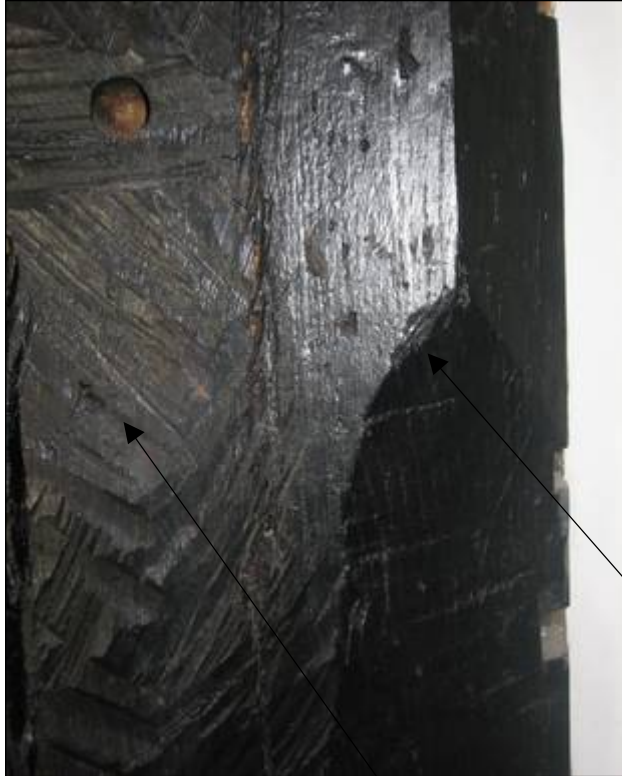
View of half of the long first floor chamber ( Bays V a – d). Formerly the arch braced and cambered tie beams supporting the single crown struts would have been open to the apex of the roof and very impressive.

The collars and upper parts of the curved wind braces are also hidden by the inserted ceiling.

Was this the heated parlour of John Dolton where he kept his five musical instruments?

The ground floor of Bays I and V has been much changed, probably through the alterations made when it was turned into a shop. The former room divisions have been removed and a new wall inserted between Bays V b and V c to separate the shop ( now a hair dresser's) from the g.f. entrance to the flat above. It also looks as if the room has been widened slightly with the loss of the framing of the north wall. It now takes in part of the carriage passage.

The remaining posts and ceiling beam are of large scantling; especially the central south wall post between Bays I a and b. This post retains shadows of mouldings on the front face as well as evidence of a large brace, not dissimilar to that of the 1405 hall at No. 76 Bell Street.



Two photographs of the South wall post of the truss which divides Bays I a and I b.

The left hand picture shows a close-up near the top of the post with a wide chamfer and stop on the right. Next to it on the left is the hacked back area of what probably was a carved pilaster on the face of the post.

The r.h. picture shows the shadow of the missing pilaster and above it (hardly visible) the cut off knee brace between post and transverse ceiling above.

This room is 3 m high, an unusually high room. The next room, from Bay Va onwards is only 2.15 high – quite a difference, indicating either different building dates or different status for their uses. Was this front room built as a hall? If so the ceiling beam may have been a tie beam which supported the earlier roof, later replaced with the large chamber above.



G.F. south range, south wall, Bay V a on plan. The ceiling beams support an impressive 1<sup>st</sup> floor chamber



G.F. transverse joist between Bays V a and V b, formerly divided into two rooms.

**Behind Bay V d lies a three-bay, timber framed building** ( Bays IX, X and XI), which has the look of a **former stable or barn** due to its later hoist door, but which was probably part of the lodging range as it shares the wall frame and west truss of Bay Vd (called Truss A on plan) as well as a brick stack. Although there is evidence of former room divisions in the timbers which make up the trusses in the form of empty mortises for braces and rails there is no evidence of an upper floor. However, the building needed large-scale repairs during conversion to a hair salon after it ceased to be a public house and structural evidence may have been lost when timbers were replaced. Oral evidence of a loft above part of the building, where the hoist door is, exists, but this loft could have been supported by posts, rather than being tenoned to the wall structure.



The south wall post of Truss C showing a brace slot and empty mortise of a former rail dividing the room.



The former hoist door, now a high window. This appears to be a later insertion. The window is C 20<sup>th</sup> as are all other windows.

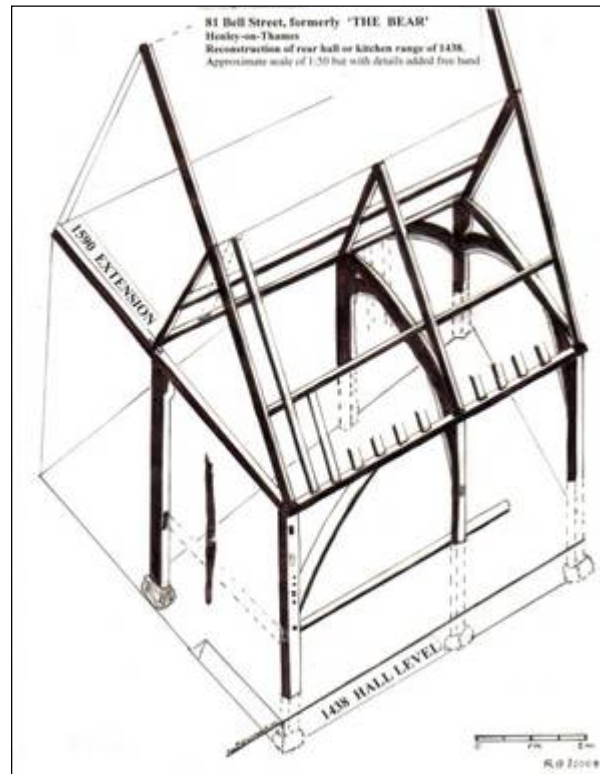


**The rear range behind No. 81** is the most intriguing of all the buildings at The Bear; it has been the subject of a more detailed investigation with some measured drawings carried out and two dendro dating campaigns. These have resulted in the date of 1438 for the felling of the oaks of the small, two-bay open hall and the date of 1589/90 for the north extension. The architect's plans provided by the owners have also been used to annotate additional information found during visits; all are attached in the appendix.

The building is of a slightly trapezoidal shape and consists of two unequal bays of c. 2.20m and 3.30m respectively. It appears to have been a free standing structure and is still separated from its present front range by c. 1 foot. Three of its corner posts survive; although not complete, they show that the building is unlikely to have been a remnant of a once larger structure. It may have been the rear, open hall to the street front business premises (shop, offices or hostelry?); or it may have been built as a separate kitchen. This was common practice in the middle ages, to minimize fire hazards to the whole establishment. Unfortunately not enough of the 1438 roof structure survives (only the lower parts of the rafters and the south and central wall plates) to work out what that might have looked like.



Rafter extension in 1590 through a simple lap joint for the new, taller roof. NB still smoke blackend



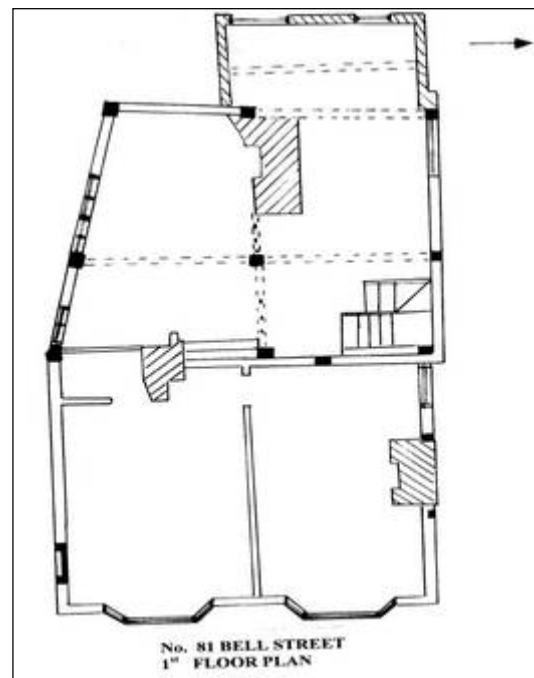
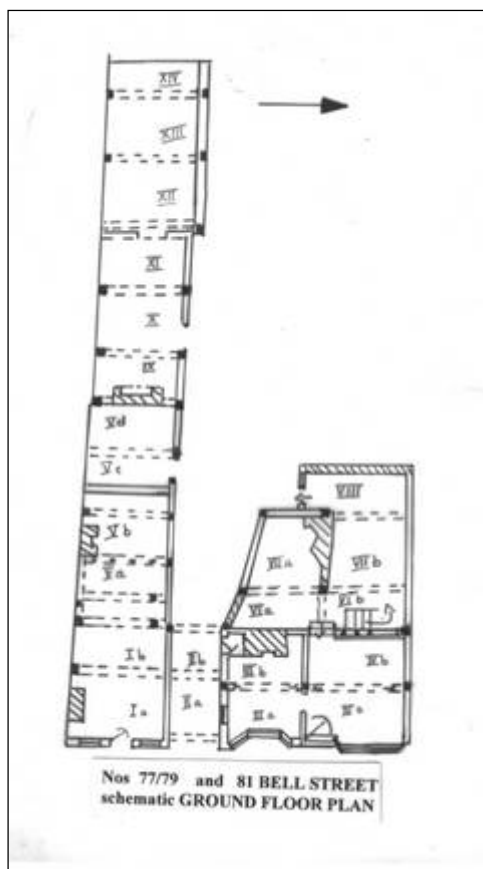
It continued in its use with an open hearth, even after its sideways enlargement in the 1590s, as the smoke blackened rafters show.

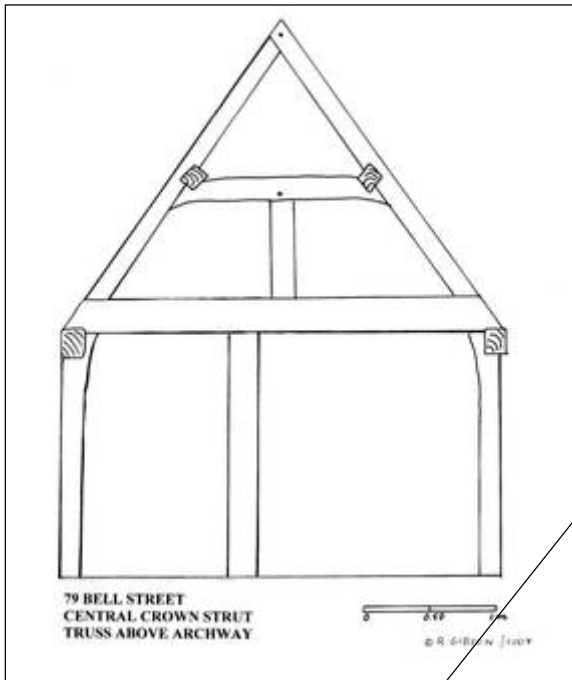
The trapezoidal shape of the first hall, which must have posed some problems for its carpenters, would have been due to the slight curve of its long, but narrow burgage plot following the layout created by a slight bend in the road. It also indicates that the construction of this hall had to take account of already existing buildings on the site to ensure that the through passage to the back, was retained.

Whilst the long range on the south side of the plot cannot be dated with any accuracy, failing the confirmation through dendro dates at present, the crown strut roof trusses (a roof form developed from the crown post roof and leading to the side purlin roof with its two queen struts supporting the collar, which became almost universal and which can be seen in the 'Barn' at trusses C and D and adjoining 'Stable') and the very substantial wall posts indicate an early to mid 15<sup>th</sup> century date. There are two examples of local crown strut roofs dendro dated to 1454 and 1443. It seems therefore possible that part of the south range may be contemporary with the 1438 hall/kitchen, of which unfortunately no firm evidence of the roof truss survives.

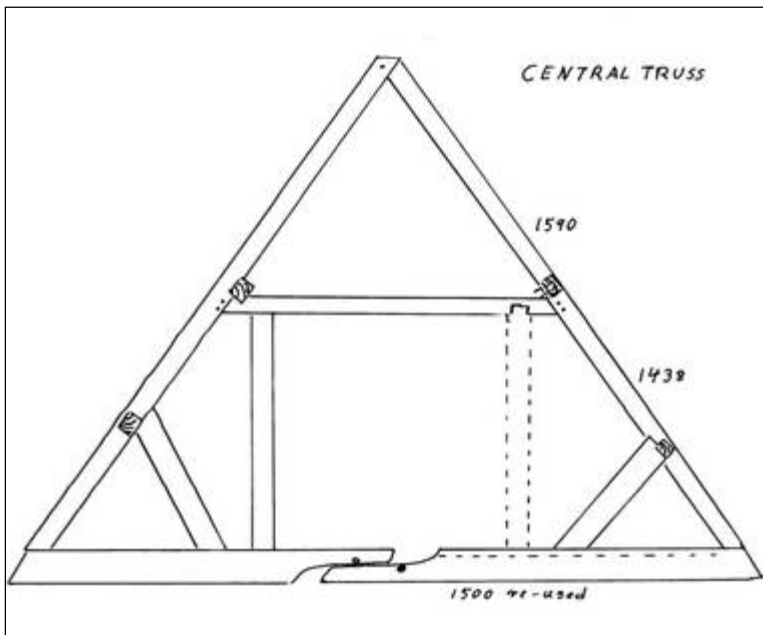
The difference in ground floor ceiling heights in the south range between Bays I a & I b and Bays Va to Vd is also a strong indicator of different building dates. The similarities in the roof truss construction, i.e the use of crown struts, indicates similar dates for the first floor chambers, but this does not rule out the survival of an earlier building at g.f. level. The tall single, surviving wall post in the shop front room (No. 77, bays I) retains strong evidence of an open hall structure in the form of the hacked back pilaster on its front face as well as the seating of a substantial arch brace. The open hall opposite at No. 76 Bell Street has very similar features and has been dendro dated to 1405.

To properly understand these buildings and their date ranges, considerably more and detailed measured recording work of all ranges and widening of the dendro investigations to include the central and south buildings would be essential. Here first attempts have been made to work out some dating sequences as well as the use of the various buildings on this site. The latter has been helped greatly by John Dolton's detailed inventory taken in 1683 by John Darby and John Beard as they walked from room to room (see transcript below).

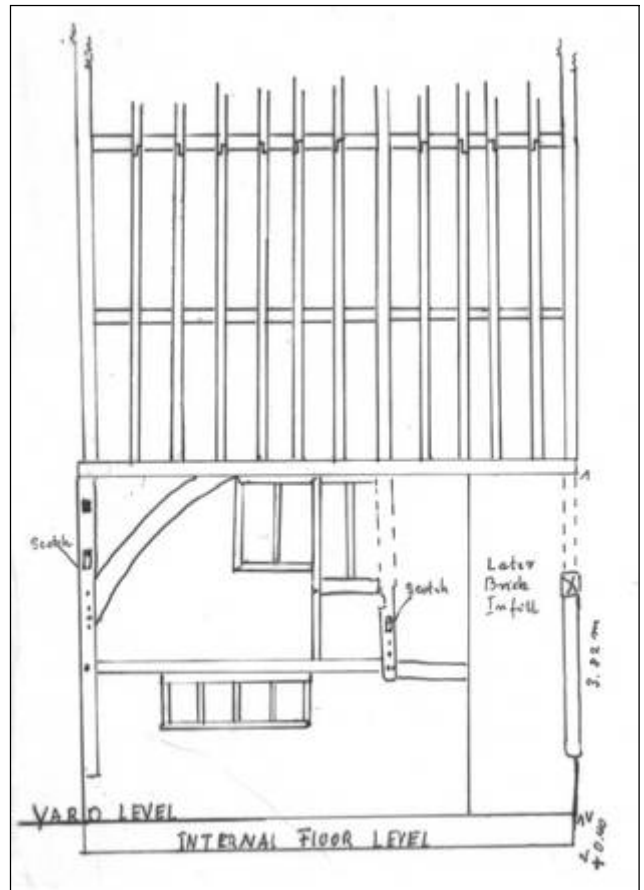




Truss and cross wall at first floor level between bays II a and II b; the tow chambers over the 'Gatehouse'.



Truss between bays VI and VII, looking east in the roof of No. 81, which was extended in 1590



Sectional elevation of the south wall and roof of the medieval rear hall or kitchen at No. 81