

**VERNACULAR BUILDINGS RESEARCH
HENLEY ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL GROUP**

Parish/County: Henley-on-Thames, Oxon

Street and House name: 'The Old Bell', PH No. 20 Bell Street: briefly called La Campana'; since 1920s 'Ye Olde Bell', before this 'The Duke of Cumberland' .
SU 761 827

Owners: Brakspear Pub Company
Tenant: Bill Dobson
Recorded: Ruth Gibson & members of the HA&HG and OBR
Dates: June-October 2009

Listing grade and entry text: Gd II

'Prob. late medieval altered. Mock timber façade over plaster, gr. floor underbuilt in brick, Southern side door leads to through passage. G.f. front room with exposed ceiling beams of very heavy section. Rear g.f. room has exposed ceiling beams of lighter section, prob. 17th cent.'



20 Bell Street, west/front elevation showing hipped roof, which replaces gable of 1325 date



20 Bell Street, l.h.side, east/rear elevation.
N B difference in roof heights

Dendro dated June 2009 by Dan Miles, Oxford Dendro Laboratory, to spring 1325 – this makes it Henley's oldest house, built in the reign of Edward II

Summary and Discussion: This is a three-bay, two storey timber framed building with side passage (which may be part of a later alteration) on the south side of the ground floor. It is located in the north-south thoroughfare, formerly called North Street, of the town near the cross roads and market area. Its narrow 5.73 m frontage suggests that it was probably the wing of a larger building as burgage plots here tend to occupy a two perches (10.06 m) wide street frontage. The possible absence of a hall suggests that it was once larger. The 1878 OS map shows a wide variety of frontages and at that date the PH appears to share the large rear yard of Nos. 22/24 to the north whilst documentary evidence connects it with the Assembly Rooms to the south. Both sides have physical links - a shared brick wall on the south and the timbers of a prob. late 17th/18th framed gable supported by the north wall plate of the 1325 building.

No. 20 was very probably formerly jettied and had a gable fronting the street, but was subsequently given a hipped roof, underbuilt in brick and rendered with mock framing. It has a central stack, built of 2" bricks, inserted at the back of Bay II. There is physical evidence of three former crown posts with a fourth very probably in the east gable. Only that of Truss 2 remains intact and consists of an octagonal shaft with richly moulded cap, standing on a square base with wide chamfers and rounded edges, giving it the appearance of a cushion. The post is supported on a substantial tie beam with large arch braces rising to it from the wall posts. Long, straight braces rise from the main posts to the wall plates.

The wall plates are chamfered at the lower edge and respect the posts with a stop. An interesting detail is the existence of two further wall posts, 54/55 cm (22 ½") in from each of the front corner posts. Whilst that on the north side is clearly primary, as it too is respected by chamfer stops and is of a similar dimensions as the other wall posts (8-9"), the one in the south wall survives only in the form of a short stump and is of narrower scantling (6 ½ by 5"), also it is not respected by chamfer stops. It has been suggested by Dan Miles that these posts would have risen from the floor through the two storeys, unlike the corner posts of a jettied building, which only rise between storeys. Was this 'hung jetty' a type of construction in use before the medieval carpenter felt confident enough to do without the full height posts for supporting the jettied storeys of the front elevation?

The existence of a substantial two-centred arched opening in the west/street front, where all adjacent timbers are chamfered and posts framing the opening have deep reveals and are buttressed by two long tension braces, adds to the quality of this large chamber. Was this the opening for a former oriel or bay window? Remnants of colour washed plaster also survive between some timber members of the adjoining walls.

There is a difference in roof heights between the rear bay and the two front ones, which is only apparent from the outside rear yard. Internally there is a substantial slope in the floor, increasing from the west wall to the stack, which may account for differences in height. The ceiling height in the rear ground floor room too is considerable higher than that of the front bar (Bays I and II). These differences mean that Bay III underwent alterations, such as floor insertions, at different times. However, there also appear to be two wall posts and braces, side by side at Truss 3, first floor, north wall, but no evidence of this in the south wall opposite. However, both areas are difficult to access and no conclusions can be reached about the significance of these differences at present. The conversion to attic accommodation of Bay III has resulted in the loss of much visible historic fabric and it remains unclear whether it was part of the large first floor chamber or built as a separate structure, possibly an open hall.

The building underwent major alterations earlier, probably in the 18th century. The small cellar with street access seems to date from this time, as does the south brick wall it shares with the Assembly Rooms at No. 18. It is also likely that the floor level was raised when the cellar was inserted with the subsequent need for a higher ceiling in Bays I and II (i.e. the bar and side passage). Evidence from other medieval houses in the town shows that street levels rose over the centuries by some 0.40–0.50m (i.e. Baltic Cottage and The Bear, both dated to 1438 and both with ground floors well below street levels); such a scenario would explain the evidence for the apparently very low, former ceiling of Bays I and II in the form of the only surviving wall post and its two cut tenons of former transverse beam and brace. (See scale drawing in appendix and photographs below). This earlier ceiling would have been only 1.26m above the present floor level, an impossible room height! A floor level in 1325 of some 50 cm plus below the present street and room level can therefore be assumed.

Known History: See Cottingham, Ann 'The Hostelries of Henley'; a public house under the name of the 'Duke of Cumberland' since the 1760s, before that from 1713 the house of Mr.

Taylor. From 1765 owned by Hayward, a brewer and maltster and it became linked to the next door property at 16/18, known as the Assembly Rooms. A malt house is documented here in the 1760s, but it was rebuilt in its present form in circa 1800. It became the Assembly Rooms when the original 'Bell Inn' at Northfield End, where assemblies had been held, closed in the 1850s. It was in 1920 that the public house at No. 20 was re-named 'Ye Olde Bell'.

Brakspears in the 1920s did much refurbishment, which probably included the loss of the projecting first floor jetty by underbuilding it in brick.

The very narrow frontage of only 5.73 m of The Old Bell and the fact that it has a large first floor chamber, but appears to lack the focal point of all medieval buildings, the hall, point to it being a wing rather than a complete building.

Historic Background: Going back to 1325 and looking for a possible builder of what must have been an impressive property: Dr. Robert Peberdy's research on medieval Henley (*The economy & government of a small town in Medieval England: A study of Henley from 1300 - 1540*) shows that London merchants had a great deal of interest in securing a market share at this collection point for goods on their way to London, the population of which was close to its medieval peak. London traders owned property in Henley as well as having their agents located here. Interestingly by 1325 a lengthy period of poor harvests and livestock diseases was coming to an end at the same time as that of the unpopular reign of Edward II. The poor weather pattern had caused famine and severe food shortages with very high grain prices. Was this new building the result of large profits made by a London or local merchant taking advantage of the high food prices and wishing to establish himself in the centre of the market town?

Description of the site and structure

Date of 1st map 1878, type of plot. The building is located on the east side of Bell Street on a narrow 5.73 m wide plot, now curtailed at the back. On the 1878 map this property apparently shared a c. 150 feet long plot with No. 22; both had a number of outbuildings at the back. The rear yard to both is shown to have been accessed by a narrow passageway marked on the south side of No. 22; there is still a side door in this location. No through passage is indicated on the map at No. 20.

Plan form/position in street: Built at right angles to the street it is of a total width of 5.73 m, with a side passage on the south side of between 0.95m – 1.05 m width. The building consists of three timber framed, medieval bays of a length of just under 12 m, which are still well defined by their roof structure. The later single storey rear extensions have not been recorded. A circa 1.50 m square brick stack with back-to-back fire places sits between the front bar (Bays I/II) and Bay III, the rear bar/dining area. The location of this stack has created lobbies at both the north and south sides and allowed a narrow, turned staircase to the first floor as well as a staircase to the cellar to be built at the south side; both stairs are accessed from doors in the passageway (*Appendix 4*). There is oral evidence of an earlier staircase on the north side of the stack; an RSJ in the ceiling indicates structural alterations in this area.

Building type: This is a timber framed building of two storeys. It was formerly jettied at the front, probably with a hung jetty, which is characterized by an additional floor to attic post located behind the jetty. Here such a post, set in by c. 21" from the corner, survives well in the north wall, but only at first and attic levels. The roof is a crown post construction with one complete crown post at Truss 2. The collar purlin, collars and paired rafters are extant in the two front bays and partially in the third. All four tie beams survive, as do most of the wall plates, posts and braces at first floor and attic levels. Bay III is most heavily altered and much of the framing is not accessible, but there are some notable differences between it and bays I & II. The tie beam of truss

four is located 0.42 m above the present floor level, compared with 0.80 m high tie beams of trusses 2 and 3.

Description of the building's exterior: A rendered exterior with mock framing on the west front, plain render on the back. The ground floor front consists of 20th C. brickwork. The modern entrance door opens into a long passage on the south side. The windows at g.f. are horizontally sliding sashes; at first floor there is one three-light, side hung window, which has been divided and now lights the two front rooms but occupies the lower part of an original, tall opening. - The tiled roof is hipped on the west/street frontage, but otherwise pitched with a gable at the east/back end. The rear bay roof is slightly lower than that of the two front bays. There is a short, connecting roof between The Old Bell and No. 22, which seems to have been inserted when the latter was built to avoid the creation of a valley. It protects the (late) timber framed south gable of No. 22.

The ground floor front bar has exposed ceiling joists tenoned into a transverse beam of heavy scantling of c. 22 by 22 cm (c 9"). Most timbers appear to be re-used, especially the transverse beam which has a large number of empty mortises; the joists are up to 20 cm (c. 8") wide, flat laid at between 25 – 33 cm gaps (10 – 13") and badly hacked back, probably to hide them under a later plaster ceiling. The transverse beam extends from the post in the north wall, across the bar and passageway (where it was cut back to allow for headroom) to the south brick wall, which it shares with the Assembly Rooms to the south. - Within the north wall are the only extant parts of a wall post at g.f. level. It retains several substantial sawn off tenons, which show how the original ground floor framing worked. The former wall posts of the front/west elevation are missing, probably removed when the jetty was underbuilt in brick in the early 20th C.

The surviving post remnant is located at c 3.30 m from the front brick wall. It shows clear evidence of the sawn off tenon in its wide splayed head and two former braces, one visible in the south face and one in its east side. There area also still peg grooves and holes of now vanished pegs, which would have kept the braces in place. If this post is in its original position, as it appears to be, the large brace springing from its face indicates that the room was divided here, probably by a stud wall. Another post, 1.20 m further east, appears to be part of a low, only 1.68 m high and 1.15 m wide opening. The timbers are in very poor condition and heavily rotted from the floor upwards. (See drawing in appendix for details).



G.f. post in north wall. This wall post is 8" thick, c.10" at the splayed head with a cut off, large tenon for an earlier ceiling beam which must have supported a considerably lower ceiling, now at only c. 1.26 m above the present floor level. There is also evidence of two braces springing from this post from peg holes and the sawn off tenon, which indicates a former dividing wall across this room.



Transverse beam in g.f. bar with flat laid ceiling joists measuring c. 8" at 10" – 13" centres.

All timbers show signs of re-use; they have also been severely hacked back, probably to accommodate a plaster ceiling underneath or to increase head height. These beams replace the originally lower ceiling, but their size suggests that the joists were re-used.

The front bar occupies Bays I and II of the building, with a brick stack inserted between Bays II and III. Bay III has a higher ceiling, narrower ceiling joists and a chamfered axial beam, quite different from that of the front bar. This ceiling is certainly of a later, possibly 17th C. date.

A **passageway** c.0.95–1.05m wide runs the whole length of the building on the south side. No timber framing, apart from the ceiling joists, remains here as the south wall was rebuilt. It consists of large 3" bricks with two c. 3.50 m long and 0.78 m high segmental, relieving arches set into the wall. No. 20 and neighbouring No.18 (Gd II listed, early 19th C.) share this dividing wall and it appears to replace the framing up to first floor level and may be to attic level in the much altered Bay III. The thin dividing wall between passageway and bars consists of studs with panelling made up of re-used rectangular panels, tongue and grooved boards and various sash windows. That of the front bar is a vertically sliding sash and may once have served the off-license trade. There are horizontally sliding sashes at the back. There are no early features to confirm that this passage was part of the original plan form.



South wall, built in 3" bricks, laid in irregular English bond. The size of the bricks indicates a date post 1784, the date of the introduction of the brick tax and before 1850 (when it was abolished and when the standard 2 1/2" brick increasingly became the norm). The 3.50m wide relieving arches have been filled with smaller, irregular brick work. Were they originally open arches between the maltings next door and the public house ?

The first floor: This is now divided into small landing and stairs, front living room, small front bedroom, rear bedroom and small storage room/ kitchen. The two front rooms occupy the same space as the g.f. bar and passageway with a FP set in the dividing wall between Bays II and III.



Long tension brace in 1st floor front west wall; one of a pair bracing the posts which frame the window.



South wall post which supports the surviving complete crown post (truss 2) in the attic above the later ceiling.

The curved arch brace, which springs from the face of the post, helps to support the tie beam.

The straight braces are mortised into the wall plates above (out of sight) stiffening the wall frame

In the north wall there is a similar post, 20 cm (8") wide, with straight braces and an arch brace. The wall studs, quite closely spaced, are also still visible. These are missing in the south wall, but evidence of them survives in the wall plate soffit or underside (see Appendix 6 and photograph p.11).



North wall: Wall post, studs and post with arch brace of Truss 2 seen in first floor front room. The other post seen at the end of the row of narrow wall studs is also 20 cm wide and is an additional wall post, set back from the front wall corner post (which is not visible here) by over 2 feet (67 cm)

Note long, curved tension brace in front/west wall – one of a pair, its partner is shown in the photo p.5

This slot in the south/ west wall post (seen here at 1st floor level) may have been a window shutter groove or part of a 'stud and panel partition', a sophisticated double skin wall.



Both the bedroom and landing in Bay III have visible remnants of posts and braces disappearing into the later inserted ceiling and walls.

Post and arch brace of truss 3, north wall below on left. Note the existence of an apparent second post and brace directly behind it, which is also visible in Bay III.

The north wall of this bay with inserted ceiling below on right. This ceiling may be a 17th C. insertion and is quite different from that in Bays I and II, which is hidden under plaster and consists of very narrow ceiling joists supported by a transverse beam, which has been inserted rather clumsily under the tie beam by cutting into the underside of the two large arch braces.



The attic and roof structure: part of the rear attic (Bay III) has been converted into a utility space and bathroom with only very little of the framing visible. The tie beam of Truss 4 is visible just 42cm above floor level in the north-east corner with a short section of a large arch brace showing below which connects to the corner wall post, visible in the bedroom cupboard below.

Low tie beam of Truss 4 in east wall of Bay III, attic; the brace is also just visible behind the pipe work.

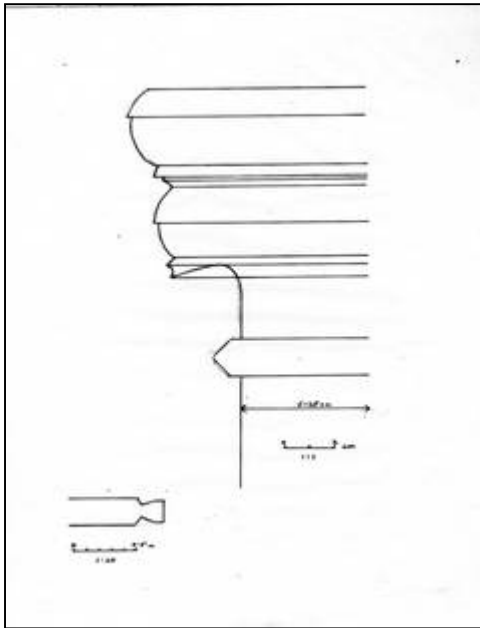
In the first floor, rear bedroom one can see the lower part of the arch brace springing from the north-east corner post, now partly hidden behind shelves and cupboard doors.



In the small loft space above the utility room one can see the paired rafters, which appear slightly sooted, (may be the result of leakage from the stack or sooted from an open fire and then cleaned when the water tanks were inserted); no collars are visible, but they may have been incorporated into the inserted floor.

The **main part of the attic comprises Bays I & II** and can be accessed from the landing in Bay III through a small access door in the lath and plaster wall which closes Truss 3.

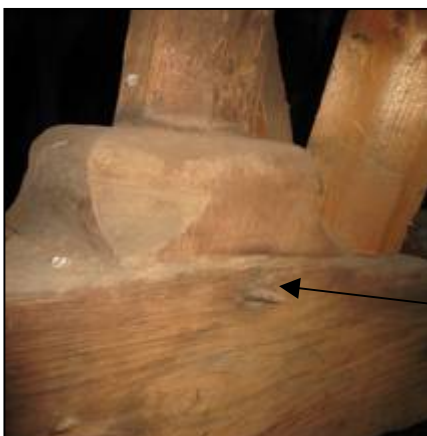
The roof space of Bays I and II is dominated by the complete crown post assembly of Truss 2. This consists of a 5.65 m long tie beam, supported by arch braces, the tops of which are visible here, whilst their springing from the wall posts was observed in the rooms below. A slender, octagonal crown post rises from a moulded base located in the centre of the tie beam and held in place by a single peg. The shaft ends in a richly ovolo moulded cap; the very fine, crisp detail of a paper-thin lip on the underside of the lower moulding is a remarkable detail and its survival over nearly 700 years is amazing. Above this the post is simply square cut and from it spring the four braces. These in turn support the horizontal timbers which form part of the triangle of the roof structure; i.e. two braces support the long, horizontal collar purlin, which runs below the line of the ridge, and two support the collar, which sits across the purlin and which in turn support the rafters. An ingenious solution for a very well framed roof, although somewhat extravagant in its consumption of timber. - Unfortunately the removal of the eastern crown post and connecting collar purlin has resulted in a great deal of stress and racking of the roof, which in turn has caused a deep crack in the upper, square section of the central post.



Profile of moulded capital above octagonal shaft. Dove tail detail of tie beam on left.



Square shaft with deep crack above capital. It still supports the 4 braces & collar purlin.



Above: This view shows the severe racking of the roof due to the removal of a large part of Truss 3 which damaged the structural integrity of the medieval roof.

Left: Moulded base with deeply chamfered corners supports the octagonal shaft of the crown post; view of east face. It is held in place by a peg driven in from the west face. (Modern repair timber on right side of picture)

Complete crown post of Truss 2 between Bays I and II with longitudinal collar purlin supporting the collars which are paired with the rafters; all still forming a perfect roof as built in 1325.

Looking west the two-centre arch set under the tie beam of Truss 1 is visible in the lower part of the picture. This is the top part of the large opening in the west gable which once would have lit the first floor chamber but became redundant once a ceiling was inserted below.



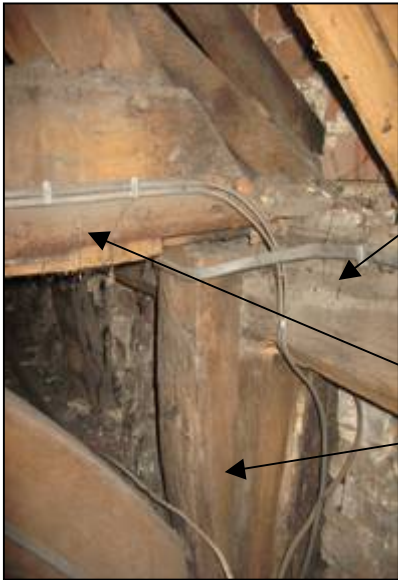
The western bay now has a hipped roof above the tie beam of Truss 1 with the hip rafters resting on it (*Appendix 8*). There is evidence of the removed crown post here in the form of a seating and peg hole on the top of the steeply cambered tie. At Truss 3 the evidence of the lost crown post exists in the cut end of the collar purlin, which preserves in its soffit (underside) one of the brace slots. (See photograph below, page 12).

Pegged below the cambered tie beam of Truss 1 are two curved, chamfered braces which form a two-centre, gothic arch (*Appendix 7*) They spring from substantial 18cm (7") posts. These form the frame of a tall opening (doorway? window?) between first floor level and tie. In their upper part one can see 15-16cm deep reveals cut into their inside faces of the posts. The modern three light window and plasterwork now occupy most of this space at first floor level and hide evidence of original detailing. All parts of the timbers which frame the opening, where visible in the loft, are chamfered and stopped. There is no evidence for any form of window mullions or shutter grooves within these timbers around the opening, so its former use remains unclear. However, it clearly was an impressive feature of this first floor chamber and its main source of light.

Chamfers and stops can also be seen in the wall plate soffits and braces. However, strangely the tie beam of Truss 2 has no chamfers, despite it supporting the richly moulded and highly visible central crown post. The tie of Truss 3 is boxed in; the short, visible section of Truss 4 also appears to have a chamfer in its tie beam soffit.



Truss 1 in west wall with arched opening & seating of former crown post. Rafters of the hipped roof are a later alteration as are the studs and laths; these support the exterior render. Also note the colour washed plaster of the side infill panels. The 15-16cm (6") deep reveals in the posts from which the arch braces spring strongly suggest an opening rather than just a decorative feature.



South wall, Truss 2. Post/tie/plate and principal form a lap dovetail assembly, but with the plate sitting on top of the post rather than being jointed into the back of it. The joint of the tie has slipped from its seating on the plate. This has been repaired with an iron strap and cleat.

View of brace tenon having slipped out of its wall post mortise.



North/west corner post with wall plate and chamfer stop where they are jointed

A second post, 54 cm from the corner post, is also respected by wall plate chamfer stops and therefore part of the primary structure.



On left: South wall, stub of post, 55 cm from the corner post. No studs survive in this wall, only their mortises in the wall plate soffit. (*Appendix 6*)

On right: North wall. Wall plate with post (shown above in more detail) and one of the three wall studs surviving here are 11-12 cm wide (4 1/2").



A brick stack has been inserted into Bay II just west of Truss 3 (*Appendices 4, 8*) It is constructed from bricks of irregular sizes up to 2" thick, with wide lime mortar joints. The bricks are of bluish/pink colour with a number of over fired, slightly glazed ones. It could have been installed as early as the mid 15th century, as locally bricks were produced, but equally narrow, irregular bricks were still being made throughout the 16th and much of the 17th centuries. Bay II also contains an original c.1 m square opening in the roof framing next to the tie beam of Truss 2. This is defined by a trimmer. Dan Miles interpreted this as a chimney/ smoke hood opening. No other evidence has been found to substantiate this as all timbers around the opening lack signs of former fixings or sooting nor can any evidence be found on the floors below, but then much of the structure has been altered, lost or is hidden. It is also possible that a smoke hood had been planned but was never installed.



Collar purlin next to inserted brick stack with mortise slot of former crown post brace in the soffit (under side).

This purlin was cut and then supported by a stud inserted below.



North side of roof. Central tie beam with top of brace rising through the floor. N.B, former opening in the roof defined by trimmer, part of the original framing.

Stud work and laths of adjoining gable of No22 are visible on the right/north side. The studs use the medieval wall plate of No.20 for support.

Chimneys and Fireplaces: The central stack measures 1.50m by 1.60m at g.f. level with evidence of two back-to-back fire places there and one in the front 1st floor room. In the loft the stack is reduced to c.1 m square. All F.P. surrounds are modern. It probably had 4 flues and served two rooms on each floor when first installed.

Stairs : The stairs are located on the south side of the central stack (*Appendix 4*) and are now only accessed from a door in the side passage, but formerly also directly from a door at the back of the bar. They are turned at the bottom and then rise straight and steeply to a small landing in Bay II. From there a second flight rises in Bay III to the attic floor. The stairs have no dateable features, but could be of late 19th C or early 20th C. date. They probably replace a winder stair attached to the stack. Apparently there was an earlier staircase at the north side of the stack (verbal information from Keith Wells-West, tenant from 1977-96, who was told about it by workmen). However, 1932 architect's drawings of the ground and first floors only show the existing staircase with an additional access to it from a small, middle room – Bay II – which now forms part of the public bar. There is no evidence at all of the 1325 means of getting to the first floor chamber, as no original floors seem to survive.

Cellar: This is small and located under parts of Bays I and II and accessed via a plank & ledge door in the north side of the passage. This door gives access to a turned staircase with small lobby next to the stack with several small storage areas adjoining its brick work. From there a further, lockable plank & ledge door gives access to brick steps with timber nosing. The heavily white washed walls appear to be of brick work with flint. The cellar measures 9'8" by 14'9" according to the architect's plans (see copy of 1931 plans by A.E. Hobbs in the appendix).

On the west side the cellar has street access, covered by a 0.40 m wide metal trap door in the pavement and a two-light window at pavement level. The cellar access has little head height. To overcome problems when manhandling the barrels down a raised, hinged timber platform was created in the front bar above the access point (when not in use during deliveries it serves as seating for customers) (*Appendix4*). This appears to be the area which was part of the street pavement before the jetty was underbuilt in brick and the front room enlarged. The trap door in the street was installed between the Court Leets of 1836 and 1868, when the encroachment on the street is first mentioned.



Cellar access from the street

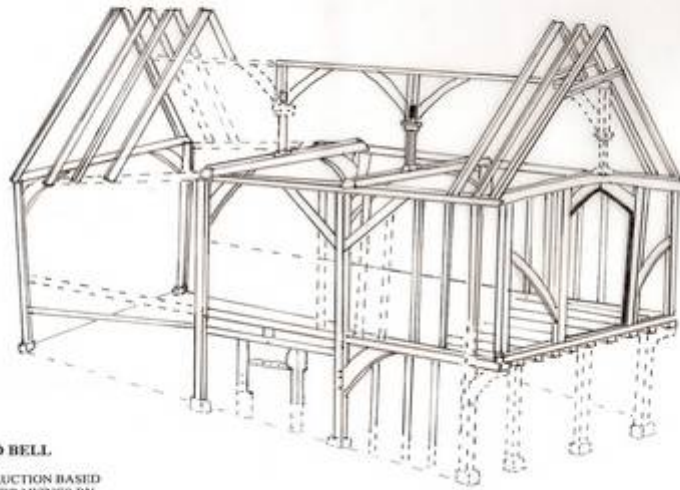


and from passageway door

Outstanding Queries:

1. **Purpose of long slot in east face of south/west corner post, visible at 1st floor and loft levels?** *Was it a window shutter groove or part of a partition panel consisting of studs and internal panels, another sign of a building of status?*
2. **Lack of chamfer in soffit of the tie beam of Truss 2.** Trusses 1 and 4 have chamfers, as have the wall plates. (NB Tie beam of Truss 3 is hidden behind planks)
3. **Purpose of trimmed, square opening in north rafters, bay II?** *Was it intended to house a chimney?*
4. **Lower position of tie beam of truss 4 – how does it work with connections of wall plates to the much higher T. 3?** Also two posts and braces adjoining at Truss 3, visible at the north wall only. *Was it a separately built bay extension or the rear hall with a closed truss separating it from the two-storey chamber block in front?*
5. **What was the purpose of the existing, fragmented framing in the north wall of the ground floor, Bay II?** *A window or a door to an adjoining structure?*
6. **What was the purpose of the two posts, parts of them visible in the side walls and set back by c.0.54 m from the first floor front corner posts?** *Dan Miles suggests a hung or tacked on jetty with full height posts rising from the ground to the wall plates (App.1)*

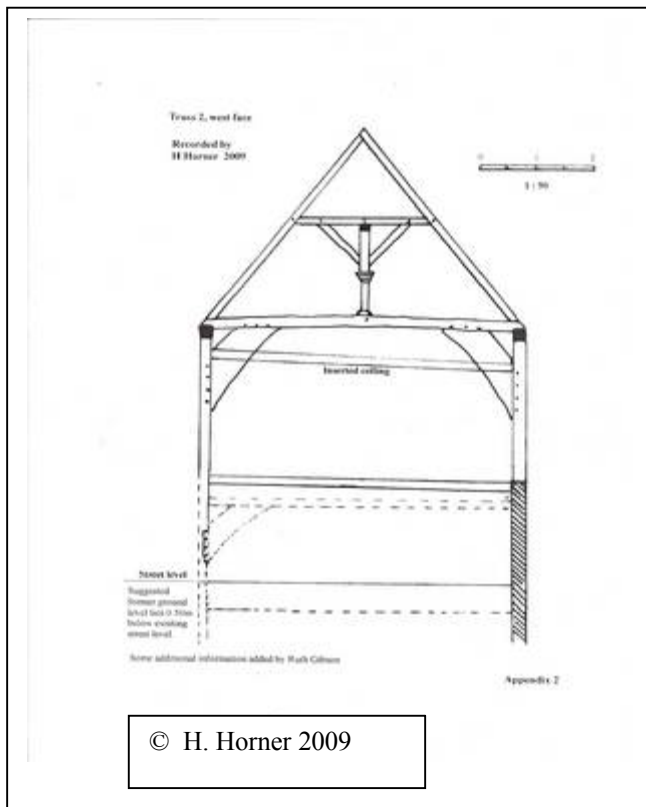
APPENDICES



THE OLD BELL
 RECONSTRUCTION BASED
 ON SCALE DRAWINGS BY
 O.B.R. MEMBERS
 © R. Gibson 2010

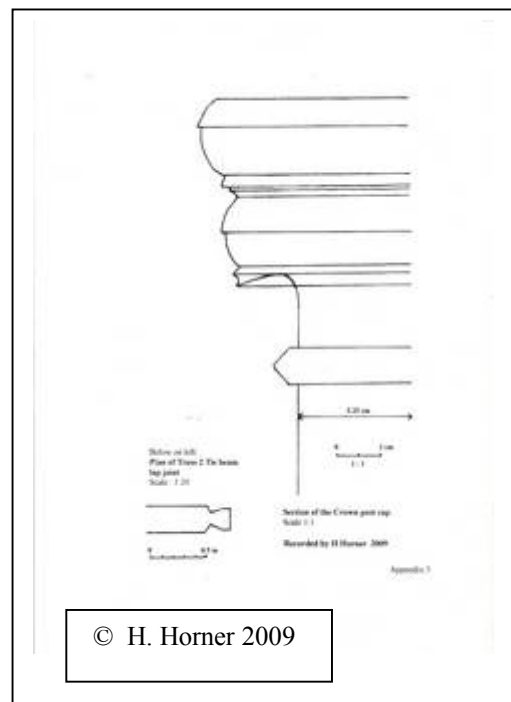
© R. Gibson

Reconstruction of 3 bay cross wing with crown post 1st floor chamber



© H. Horner 2009

Section of Truss 2 looking west



© H. Horner 2009

Profile of crown post cap

