

A LATE MEDIEVAL TIMBER FRAME AT NOS 21–22 HIGH STREET, BATH

MICHAEL HEATON AND PETER DAVENPORT

SUMMARY

Whilst timber frame buildings elicit little excitement in most of the UK, none were known to have survived within the centre of Bath until refitting works at nos 21–22 High Street exposed roof and jettied gable frames behind 19th-century lath and plaster skins. The frames, which have been resealed behind new wall linings, appear to be of 15th–17th-century form. The combination of this discovery and earlier findings at the adjacent Christopher Hotel suggest that many of the ostensibly Georgian buildings in central Bath are merely facades behind which much medieval fabric survives.

INTRODUCTION

Numbers 21–22 High Street (NGR: ST 7509 6488) is situated directly opposite the Guildhall, just within the northern edge of the medieval city and less than 100m from the Abbey in the centre of Bath (Fig. 1). The land on which the building is situated was part of a large freehold held by Sir James Hussee in 1354 and subsequent deeds document the development and transfer of nos 20-22 High Street as a single holding throughout the ensuing centuries. Crook and Sons – the last tenants prior to the present refurbishments – assumed the lease in 1893 prior to acquisition of that company by Wildings Ltd.

It is a single commercial building, now occupied by Coffee Republic. It is a listed building, situated within the Bath Conservation Area and, thereby, the Bath World Heritage Site. Remedial works during December 2000 undertaken prior to the new tenancy exposed wattle-and-daub and the apex of a roof truss, encased within 19th-century wall skins and partition walls. Subsequent investigation during refitting, commissioned by the building's owners to inform future designs for the upper floors, revealed an almost complete jettied cross-wall frame, two collar and tie-beam trusses and a palimpsest of other features indicating lifting and refacing of the building.

DESCRIPTION

Features illustrative of structural phases not evident in the external fabric were revealed as a timber wall and roof frame in the north gable, gable scars on the inner face of the east elevation

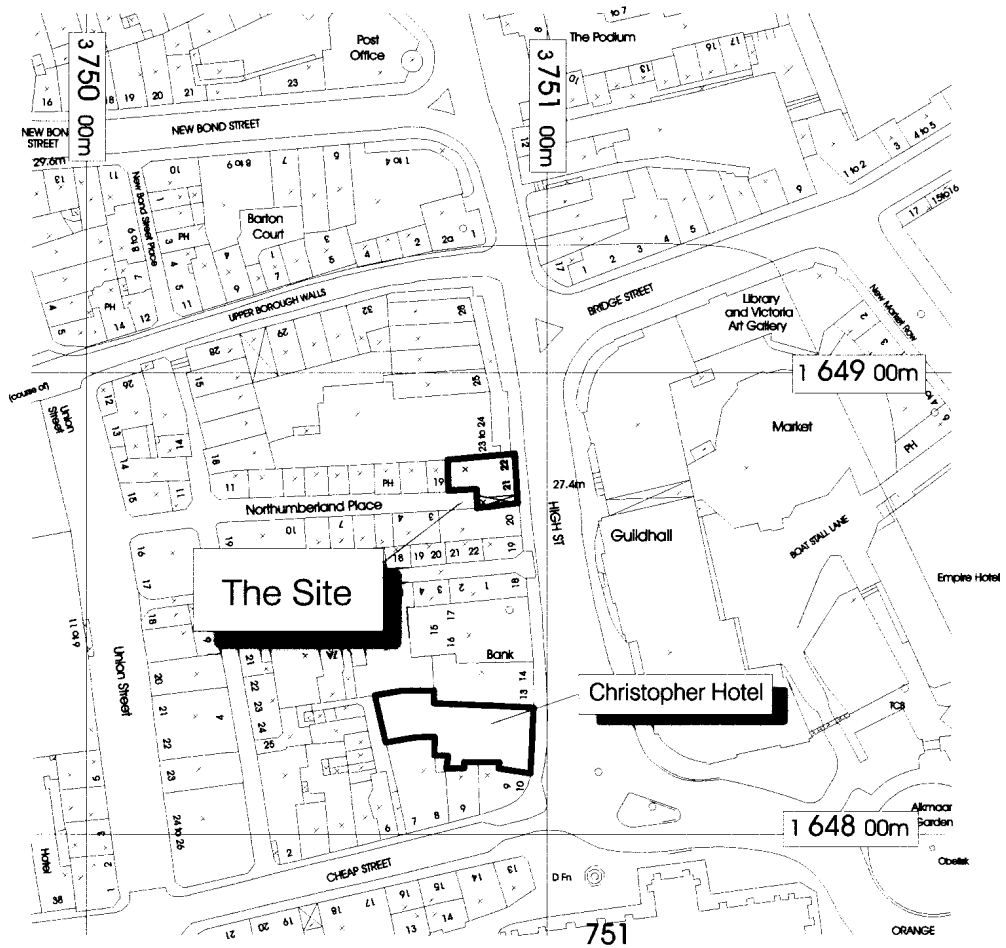


Fig. 1 The site and its situation. Ordnance Survey digital data; reproduced under licence

on the third floor, a roof truss within the main stud partition on the second and third floors, and a relict shopfront. The latter, a late 18th or early 19th-century feature, is not described here.

Frame 1 (Fig. 2)

Revealed behind 19th-century lath and plaster lining; an unfaced first floor wall frame and combined roof truss, in oak, infilled with wattle-and-daub panels. The wall frame is almost complete, but has been cut at both ends by inserted stacks; the roof frame is only partially accessible but is assumed to be complete.

The wall frame comprises two studs and a concave brace (at west end) braced laterally by tenoned and pegged rails, and is supported by an axe-trimmed chamfered-and-stopped bressumer at first floor level. The manner of jointing onto the bressumer was obscured by the modern floor. The bressumer extends beyond the chamfer stop by c. 0.6m to where it has apparently been cut by insertion of the shopfronts. The extension displays an empty mortice for a pegged upright, and possibly a half-lap in its soffit (though this has been much modified

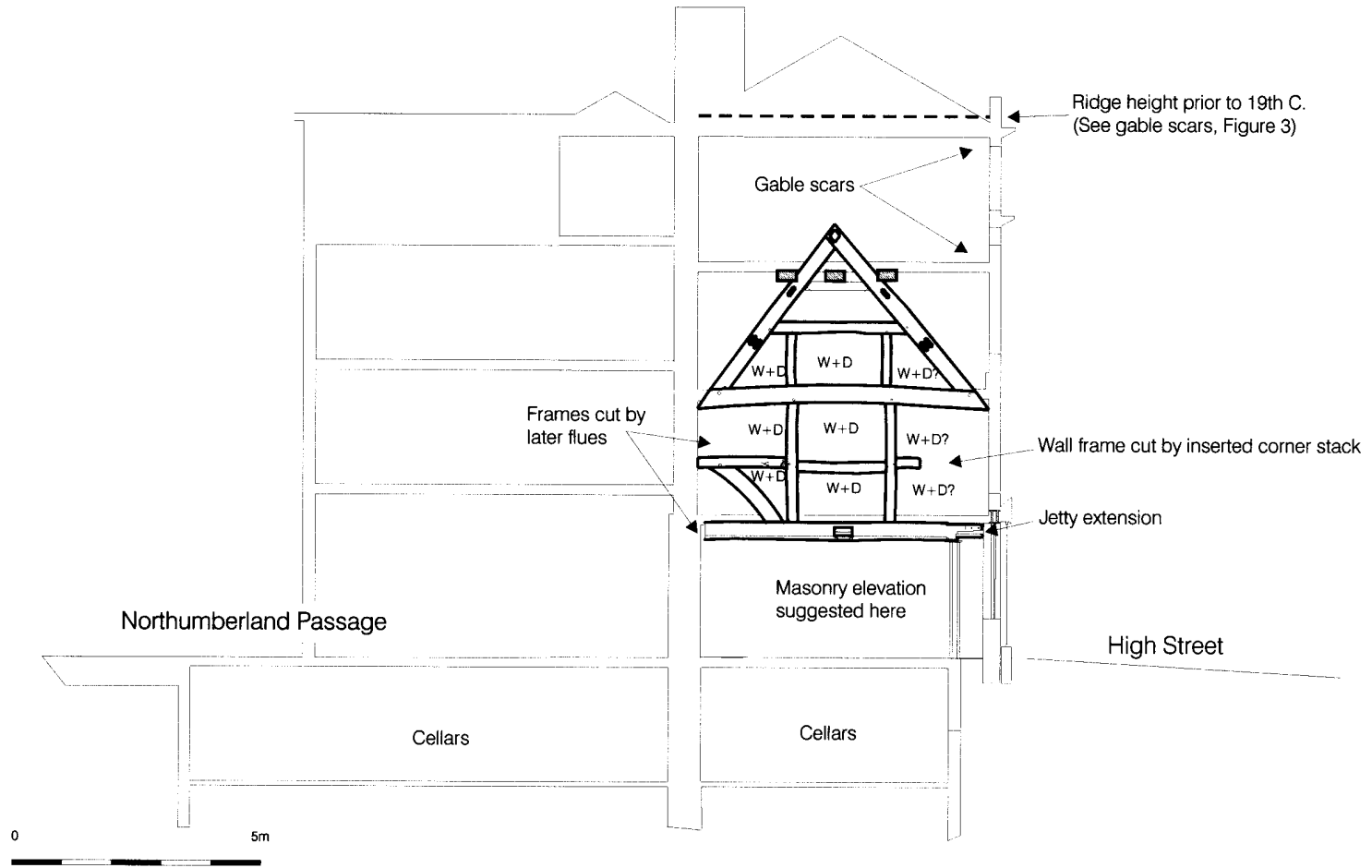


Fig. 2 West-east section through Frame 1

by subsequent shopfitting); there is, additionally, an empty tusk tenon mortice for a single transverse floor beam, but, significantly, there are no empty sockets for any uprights in the soffit of the bressumer. The east end of the bressumer is supported, 0.6m back from the shopfront, by a recent softwood post. The studs rising from the bressumer are tenoned into the soffit of a cambered tie beam which is pierced by at least two phases of modern floor joists.

The six panels formed, each approximately 1m wide x 1.6m high, are filled with wattle and daub. The wattles comprise axe-trimmed hazel staffs let into a channel in the lower rails and small sockets in the upper, with hazel wattles woven between. Some of the short staffs against the curved brace are *nailed* to it with hand-forged square-headed iron nails.

The roof truss comprises a pair (eastern half of truss not accessible) of 0.1m x 0.3m principal rafters, also in oak, rising off the tie beam at an angle of 50°. Two studs rise off the tie beam and are tenoned and pegged into the soffit of a collar brace. The three panels thus formed beneath the collar brace are filled with wattle and daub, as above, with the short staffs at either end *nailed* into the soffit of the principals. Two empty purlin mortices are visible in the south face of the western principal; a single tenon approximately 0.5m above the tie beam and a double tenon 2m above the beam, both pegged.

Conversion and assembly marks were observed on the westernmost rail of the wall frame, both close to its western end; a planed level mark, and a 'triple Y' assembly mark with two scribed circles across its base.

Frame 2 (not illustrated)

Revealed within the stud partition approximately central to the front cell of the building, an unfaced complete roof truss, in oak, partially infilled with wattle and daub panels, parallel with, and 5m south of, Frame 1.

The truss comprises a pair of 0.1m x 0.3m principal rafters tenoned and pegged into a cambered tie beam, rising at 50° to a bridled apex 3m above. Two ruddled studs rise off the tie beam and are tenoned and pegged into the soffit of a collar brace. The panels thus formed are infilled with wattle and daub as in Frame 1.

Empty purlin sockets survive in both faces. In the north face there are three sockets for double tenons, all pegged, one immediately above the tie beam and two others 0.7m and 2m above it. In the south face, there is an additional single tenoned socket 0.3m above the beam. At the ridge there is a diamond-shaped socket for a ridge purlin.

One crude assembly mark was observed, comprising four scribed lines running across the collar/principal joint roughly square to the principal.

Gable scars on third floor (Fig. 3)

Visible on the inner face of the east elevation on the third floor, two sets of gable scars indicating ridges at right angles to the ridge orientation of Frames 1 and 2, at slightly different levels and apparently separated by the axis of Frame 2.

At the north end: A pair of mortar fillets adhering to the inner ashlar face astride the northernmost third floor window, inclined at approximately 50° and suggesting an apex 750mm above the soffit of the window reveal. The northernmost of these fillets appears to be of more than one phase, the uppermost of which displays a curve at its lower edge suggestive of a thatched eave. The southernmost of the pair cuts across a blind window visible on the outside only.

At the south end: An inclined boundary at 50° between two render schemes appearing as differential weathering on the ashlar face beneath, coinciding with an exposed roundwood ceiling beam/purlin beneath the softwood ceiling joists. The area of walling on which the matching incline might be visible is obscured by several schemes of wallpaper.

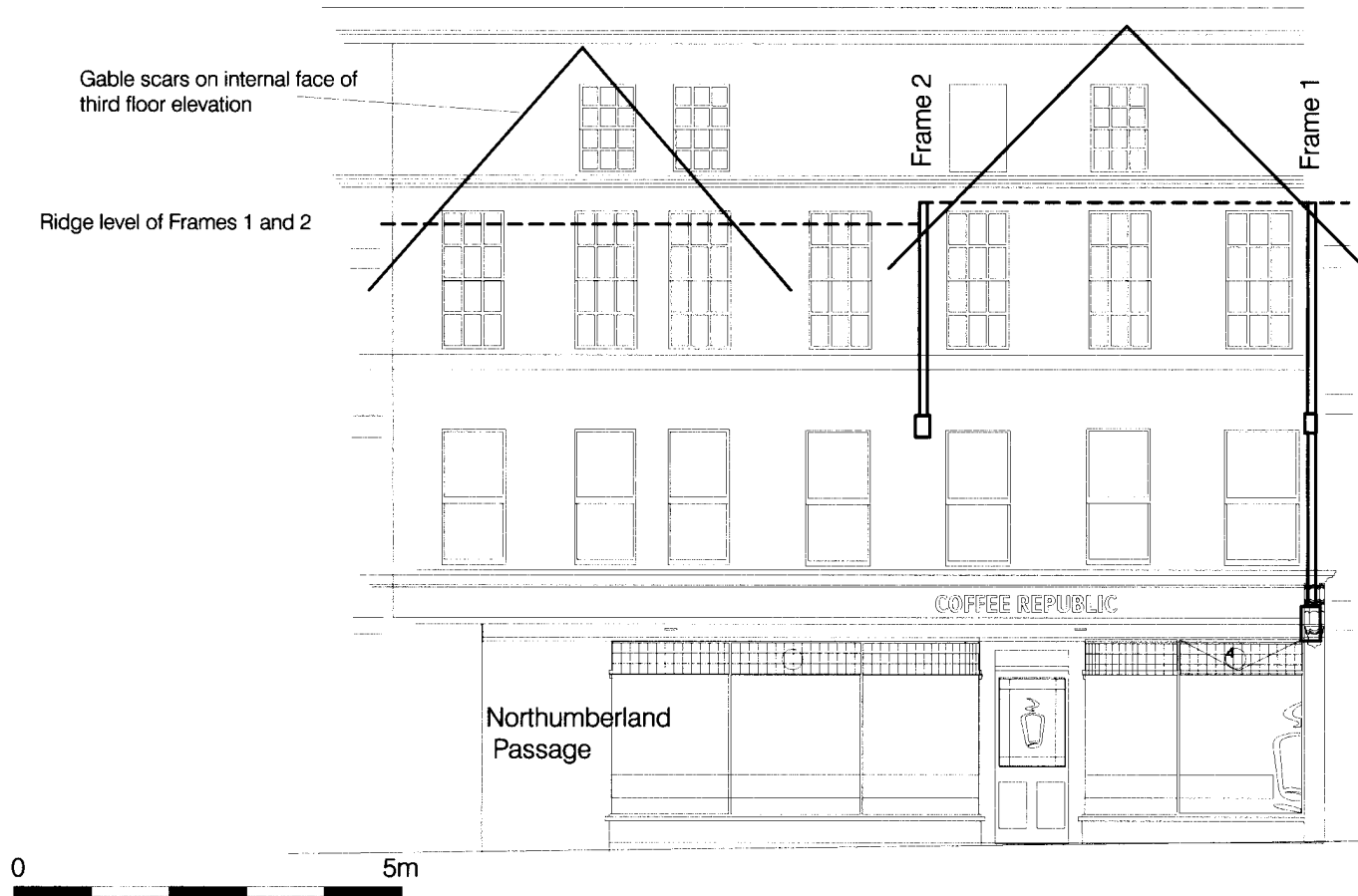


Fig. 3 High Street elevation showing position of principal internal features; drawing reproduced by kind permission of Coffee Republic PLC

CONCLUSIONS

The relatively small amount of detail accessible during a refurbishment that left undisturbed most of the building's fabric, and the fragmentary nature of the historically significant features revealed, cannot support an exhaustive or meaningful chronological analysis of the development of the building – in other words 'phase plans'. That the greater part of the building's fabric is at least 200 years old and that it displays manifest evidence of modification and development throughout that period, is neither particularly remarkable nor deserving of further comment. However the detail recorded at this site can contribute significantly to the hitherto negligible corpus of data on the pre-Georgian buildings of Bath, whilst at the same time illuminating some of the processes of change so that survival of similar features within other buildings in Bath might be readily anticipated, by others, at future sites.

The misalignment of the window openings with the floor levels in the southern half of the High Street frontage (which is in part also dictated by relict features), the blind window opening on the third floor, and the presence of gable scars on the inner face of that wall, indicate that the facade was appended, in the 18th or early 19th century, to unify the appearance of two adjoining pre-existent gable-fronted structures. It is highly likely that these were of timber construction (see below) and each occupied approximately half of the present High Street frontage. The gabled form is redolent of 17th-century forms throughout adjacent areas of South Gloucestershire and north-east Somerset (*cf.* Hall, 1983) whilst the relatively small floor area of each of the two cells is comparable to known late-medieval shops, such as the 'Horsham Shop' now at the Weald and Downland Museum. The northernmost of the two – and possibly both – had been raised from a first floor building aligned parallel to the High Street, the gable frames of which survive partially in the present building.

At a more detailed level, the partial gable frames exposed within the building provide – to the authors' knowledge – the only evidence for the form of pre late 17th-century vernacular *timber* buildings in Bath. The typological date range is potentially wide: Penoyre (1998) suggests both frames are late 16th century; Dallimore (1999) dates a similar truss at Rode to early 15th century, whilst Rodwell (*pers. comm.*) advises that, without specific datable details, this type of frame could be current between 1400 and 1600. The very low purlin sockets evident in the north face of Frame 2 indicate that this piece is reused in this context, suggesting a later date for erection of the frame at this site. The inconsistent assembly marks also suggest that the frames have been assembled using salvaged timber. Similarly, the use of nails in the wattle-and-daub panelling and the lack of facing also suggest a later date. Nonetheless, it is clearly 16th century in form and tradition, even if later in construction date. This in itself is historically significant.

The exact form of this earliest building remains unclear, mainly because of extensive fabric removal during 19th-century shopfitting, but several conclusions can be arrived at. The extension of the bressumer at the base of Frame 1 suggests a slight jetty over the High Street, whilst the lack of post or stud sockets in its soffit suggests that it rested on a first floor masonry wall. This is a form of building similar to the late medieval 'Three-Quarter House' of the market towns of Devon and Somerset (Laithwaite 1991) in which masonry side walls rise to first floor level supporting plastered stud-and-lath external 'balloon' frames of two to three storeys, braced, at the rear, by a combined stack and rear wall also in masonry. Whilst there is no evidence for a rear masonry wall here, there is sufficient evidence to support the postulated ground floor side walls, which therefore distinguishes this example of a Bath building from its bucolic counterparts in the surrounding areas of Gloucestershire and Somerset. The building(s) would have had a simple internal stair/ladder serving the upper 'solar' floor and an attached stack protruding from the rear wall.

Later raising of the second floor, and certainly the addition of the third floor, would have necessitated addition of the stair turret, a 17th-century feature in this area of the south Cotswolds (*cf.* Hall 1983) and extension upwards of the rear stack. By the mid 18th century, when the ashlar facade was appended, the building was already at its present height with a gabled elevation to the east, almost certainly of timber construction. This roof arrangement was retained behind the new facade, evident now as the gable scars on the inner face of the third floor elevation, and probably not removed until the 19th century when the present roof was added.

Whilst just about every building plot in central Bath can be assumed to have enjoyed an intensive and continuous history of medieval occupation, much of the material evidence of that history has been obscured by the extensive site clearances, rebuildings and refacings of the Georgian period. As a result, whilst neighbouring centres, such as Salisbury, Wells and Bristol display much of their medieval architecture, in Bath the *visible* survival is almost entirely ecclesiastical – limited to the Abbey and the Chapel of Mary Magdalene. Seventeenth and early 18th-century structures are visible in slightly larger numbers, such as nos 1 and 2 Abbey Green, the Saracens Head in Broad Street or the Sally Lunn terrace, but these are few and far between. As a result, little is known of the character of the secular medieval buildings of Bath, and nothing of its timber building tradition.

The features revealed at this site and at the adjacent Christopher Hotel, where Michael Heaton recorded evidence of third floor gables, a timber stair turret, and numerous lifting episodes (Wessex Archaeology 1997) indicate that some of the ostensibly Georgian buildings within the historic core embody the material remains of structures originating in the late Middle Ages, if not earlier. Only vigilance will complete the picture.

AUTHORS

Michael Heaton, ASI Heritage Consultants, Furlong House, 61 East Street, Warminster, Wiltshire BA12 9BZ
Peter Davenport, Bath Archaeological Trust, 13 Brassmill Enterprise Centre, Brassmill Lane, Bath. BA1 3JN

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