SOME BRUTON TOWN HOUSES

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on behalf of the Somerset Vernacular Building Research Group

THE TOWN

Bruton, an attractive small town in the east of Somerset on the river Brue, was originally part of a royal estate of the Saxon kings. The town was dominated for 400 years by the Augustinian Priory, from its foundation by the Mohun family in 1142 until the Dissolution: it only enjoyed its status of Abbey for the few years between 1511 and 1539. Subsequently the manor was granted to the Berkeley family.

Bruton has long been known as an important member of the group of towns, famous for their production of woollen cloth in the medieval and post-medieval period. Indeed a fulling mill, Combe Mill, was established in Bruton as early as the late 13th century and another in Pitcombe (Gant's Mill) followed soon after. In the 16th and 17th centuries, the town had important benefactors. Richard Fitzjames, Bishop of London, and others endowed a school in 1519 which later became King's School; the core of one of the original buildings survives as Old School on the opposite side of the river from the town. Hugh Sexey, who was auditor to Queen Elizabeth I, died in 1619 and left money to found a Hospital in Bruton. Sexey's Hospital was completed in 1629 and is still the largest building in the High Street. It includes a chapel and almshouses built round a quadrangle.

Bruton is considered to have been a medieval planned town (2). It has a simple street layout (fig 1) with the one High Street running parallel to and above the river on its north side, with at one time a market at the east end. The church and the site of the former Priory are located across the river to the south. There is nothing left of the Priory buildings except the high monastery wall. From the High Street, regularly spaced alleyways called Bartons lead beneath and between the houses and steeply down to the river.

THE HOUSES

Fifty four houses in the town have been listed as being of architectural or historic interest. Some fourteen buildings (fig 9) have been surveyed as a representative sample of the older houses (3), four of which have been tree-ring dated, all to the mid-fifteenth century (4). Most of the houses in the sample lie on the High Street or its eastward extension, Patwell Street, which curves down to the bridge across the Brue.

Generally houses in Bruton are built with their roofs parallel to the street, one room deep, the most frequently found type being of the two-room central-entry plan, with or without an original rear wing (seven out of the total of fourteen). There are two long jettied ranges, both much the same size and both of the mid to late 15th century. Of the remainder, three are of

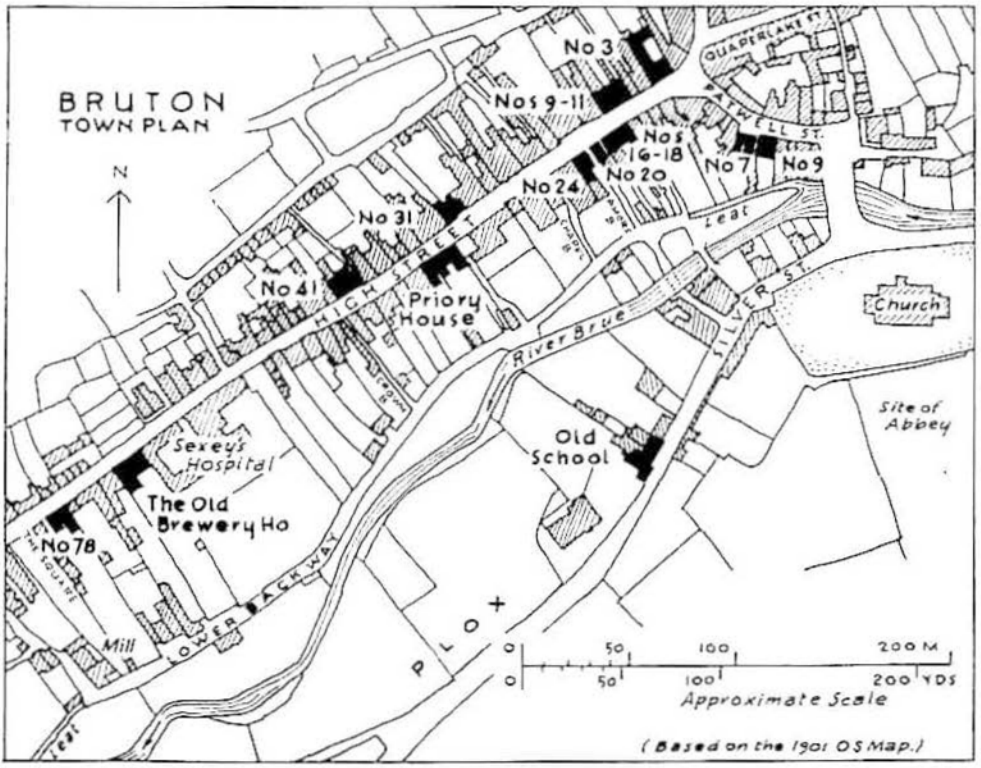

Fig. 1 Bruton Town Plan

irregular plan form falling into no obvious category and there is one example which may be the remains of a 3-room cross-passage house with a gabled wing facing the street. Half our sample are built (or refaced) in stone, the other half having stone back and side walls with timber fronts, 5 with surviving jetties.

Two Room Central Entry Plans (fig 2). Two rooms face the street with a central entrance passage between; on one side an unheated shop with a cellar below, on the other a living-kitchen. Houses of this type are surprisingly consistent in layout, regardless of date. Stairs are at the back on the domestic side and cellars are directly accessed from the back yard or garden.

Nos 7 and 9 Patwell Street adjoin and are typical of the smaller houses in this category; both have parlour wings at the rear added at different times. **No 9** has a jettied timber first floor, now underbuilt in stone, and roof timbers virtually identical to those in other High Street houses that have been tree-ring dated to the mid 15th century. Roofs in these buildings, as here, have tie-beam and collar trusses, both collars and ties markedly cambered, and have two butt purlins each side with one tier of windbraces. There seems little doubt that this is a mid 15th century house. **No 7** has a stone slated roof and a stone front showing no evidence of a jetty. The house has several early features, some cambered beams with deep hollow chamfers and two stone depressed four-centred arched fireplaces which show some signs of having been reset, possibly from elsewhere. Some of the roof timbers too are reused. If these are additions, they may have come from the demolished Abbey buildings after the Dissolution. The house was probably built in the late 16th century.

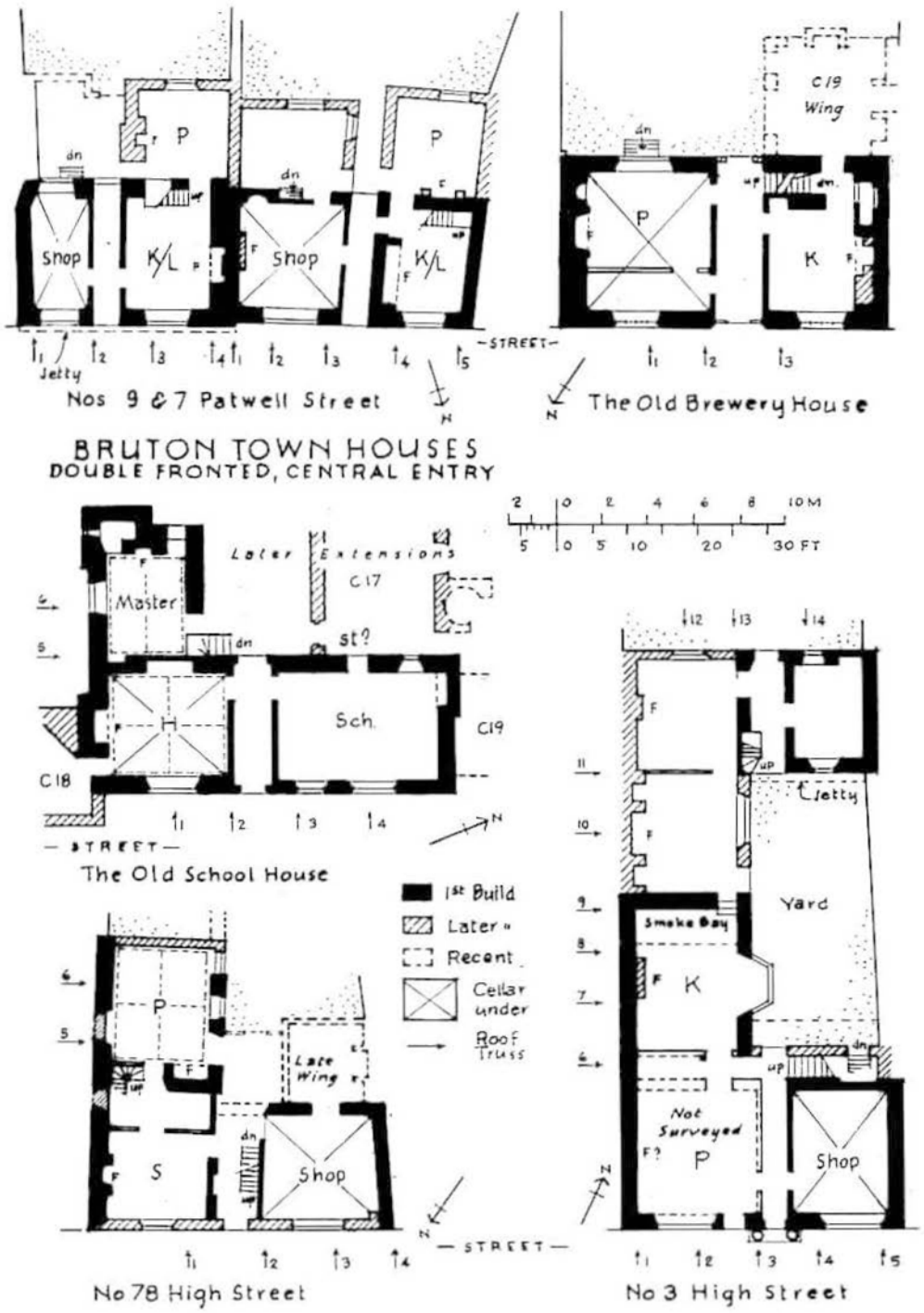

Fig. 2 Bruton Town Houses. Double fronted, central entry plans

The Old Brewery House, High Street, is a much larger house with the same two-room plan but with a far wider entrance passage, here lined with thin panelled partitions. Instead of a shop, the commercial side has an elegant Jacobean panelled business room with a typical early classical arcaded timber overmantel above a large stone fireplace (fig 3). The room again has a cellar below, not only accessible from the garden but also from within the house. On the domestic side of the passageway is a large kitchen and a staircase and, behind, a later wing. On the street front there are ovolo moulded stone mullioned windows, a wide ovolo moulded entrance arch and, above the entrance, a former oriel window, only the corbelled supporting bracket now remaining. It seems clear that the wide entrance passage was for the comings and goings of the trade, allowing access from the High Street to the extensive trade buildings that once stretched down the plot from the house to the back lane, Lower Back Way.

Although in the 18th century the premises were used for a malting and brewery and in the 19th for the silk trade, it is probable that the house was originally built for a wealthy clothier. Adjoining the house lies Sexey's Hospital, built in 1629. The fireplaces there are replicated in the Old Brewery House and it seems certain that the house and the Hospital were coeval and formed part of one development by Hugh Sexey.

The three remaining 2-room central entry houses in our sample all have original wings.

No 3 High Street, now the Pharmacy and Chemist, had its kitchen in the wing, originally with a smoke bay. The house was upgraded in the 18th century when it was refronted in the Georgian manner. The front range however retains its original roof timbers which are the same as those in no 9 Patwell Street and date the origins of the house to the mid- to late 15th century. At the back of the Courtyard, there is a small stone building with a jettied timber first floor, probably of the 16th century judging by the style of the jetty. Its purpose is unknown, but it makes a decorative end to the yard as seen from the house. Later, other additions filled the gap between this building and the house.

The rear wing of **no 78 High Street** once extended further from the house, its end wall now rebuilt. The wing is the oldest part of the house, the ground floor room with a framed ceiling and stone arched fireplace, probably of the late 16th or early 17th century. The front of the house with the shop and cellar was rebuilt, perhaps in the 18th century when the central passageway was used as access to cottages at the rear, called collectively The Square.

The Old School House is situated south of the river, the only one of our sample not on the main street of the town. It is not really a normal town house, being built as a school in the early 16th century. Nevertheless, it still adheres to the same plan of two rooms and central entry with a rear wing. In this case the wing was the schoolmaster's quarters and has a

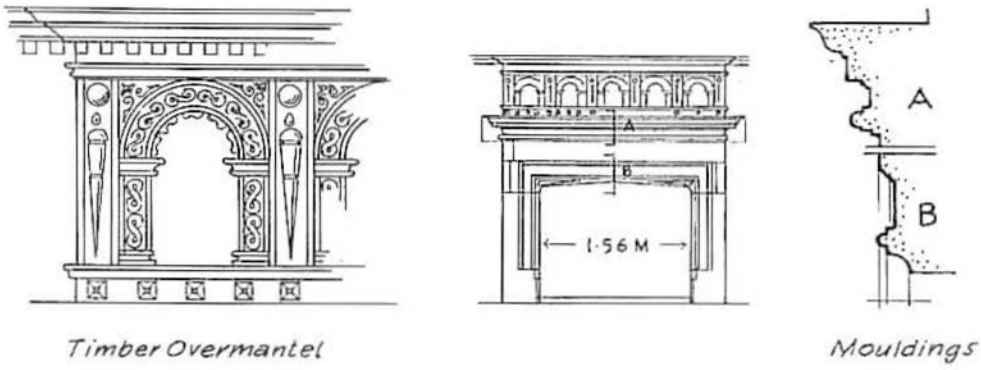

Fig. 3 The Old Brewery House, Business Parlour Fireplace

fireplace and a possible garderobe in the corner. The front range has a hall with a framed ceiling and cellar below and, on the other side of the passage, the schoolroom. The building was extended considerably in the 17th and 18th centuries and the big Hall adjoining was added in the 19th century. The roof structure is virtually identical with the mid to late 15th century houses described above.

Nos 9 and 11 High Street (now two shops but originally one house). There is a two-bay roof, the structure similar to that in other dated houses and the house is therefore assumed to be of the mid to late 15th century. The bay spacing is wider than in the other houses and a surviving jowled post in the front timber wall indicates that the house was possibly jettied, in line with structures found elsewhere in Bruton.

Continuous Jetty Ranges (fig 4) are conspicuous on the south side of the High Street, one about 21m/70ft long, the other some 18m/60ft long. Built parallel to the street, their long roofs make a marked contrast to the generality of smaller buildings. In both cases roof trusses are of similar spacing and their roof structures are virtually identical. Both have stone rear walls, stone end walls and jettied timber fronts; both are of two storeys with large attic spaces and with cellars approached from the lower garden level. Both have later wings either added or rebuilt. The chief points of difference between the two buildings lie in the subdivisions between tenancies within them and in the treatment of their facades.

Nos 16 and 18 High Street. The present division between the two houses seems to have been original, judging from the location of stairs and fireplaces. No 18 has a rebuilt wing which contains the stairs and second fireplace. Fireplaces in no 16 are of good quality stone with depressed four centred lintels, one with a stone mantelshelf.

There is little doubt that the ground floor rooms were shops (as now) with living accommodation on the upper floors where the fireplaces are located. No obvious traces of kitchens survive; they may have been in wings since demolished or rebuilt.

The attic storey has only one cross wall and the cellar only extends beneath no 18, supporting the conclusion that the present sub-division into two was intended from the outset. Cross partitions are of studding with pairs of conspicuously curved tension braces. The timber first floor front wall rests on the jetty with jowled posts supporting the tie-beams. Ties, posts and their jowls are all neatly chamfered and give the impression of a high-class building. The roof structure is the same as in the 2-room houses described above and has been dendro-dated to a precise felling date of the spring of 1454.

Priory House (now incorporating no 36 High Street). The continuous jetty is underbuilt in stone, its end walls project on carved stone corbels and the front elevation is punctuated by a central corbel, also carved, looking like the end of a central cross wall (fig 5). No stone cross wall exists today at any level, but the close spacing of the two central roof trusses suggests that it was an original feature. The carvings on the corbels consist of various grotesque animals, a coat of arms of the Mohun family and a rebus of Prior Henton (1448–1498), a hen on a barrel or tun.

When the central cross wall was removed (assuming it was ever built) the resultant single unit building is thought to have been used as a town hall and a courtroom (5). A 'Market Hall' was built on the north side of the street in 1684 (plaque), later the Masonic Hall. Priory House has three ground floor fireplaces, symetrically disposed (all now with modern replacements) and the ground floor has a framed ceiling adapted to form rectangular panels throughout the length of the building, the beams moulded in the late 15th century manner. The lateral stack and a former doorway, reached by external steps from the rear, suggest the use of the central space as a courtroom.

In the early 18th century, the east end of the building was converted into a gentry house with added wings, high quality panelling and fittings. Conspicuous over the parlour fireplace is a fine 18th century landscape painting incorporated in the panelling.

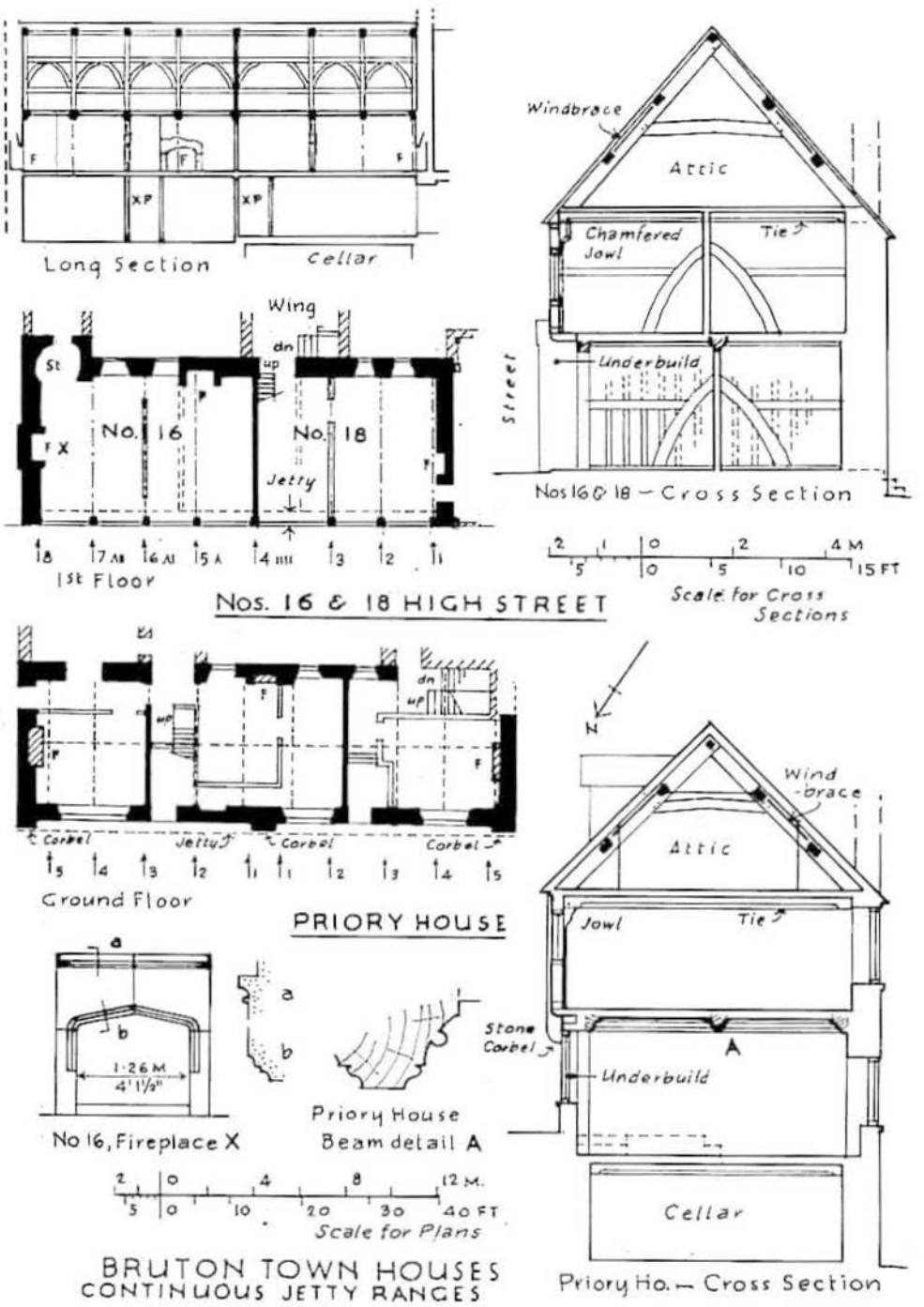

Fig. 4 Bruton Town Houses. Continuous jetty Ranges.

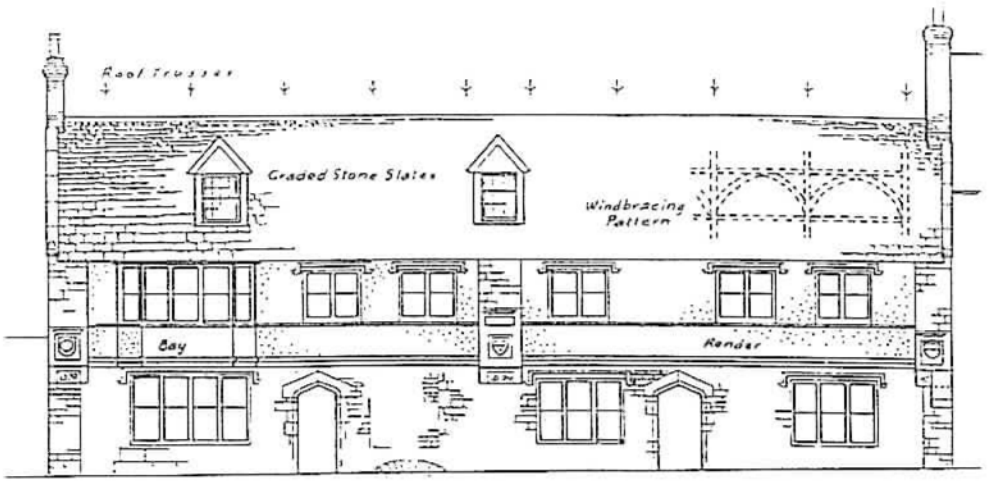

Fig. 5 Priory House, front elevation

Irregular Plans (fig 6)

The four remaining houses in our sample have different plans from the above groups, although three of the houses have similar 15th century structures.

No 31 High Street has a parlour cross-wing presenting a gabled timber jettied end to the street, now underbuilt. The otherwise stone built house consists of a 2-bay hall and entrance passage with a stair turret at the back. This was probably a traditional 3-room, cross-passage house which has lost its service end to the east.

Timber framed partitions have straight tension braces and the main range roof over the hall has tie-and collar trusses yielding a felling date of the winter of 1453/4 (the same as nos 16 & 18 High Street). The cross wing has two remaining arch-braced trusses with unusual thickening of the principals at the apex and curved braces above the collar.

In the cellar of the cross-wing there is a much earlier beam and one surviving brace, (fig 7) dendro-dated to cl295, a remarkable date for the original house. This structure, supporting the floor of the earlier house, has square section timbers and an early scarf-joint of a known 13th/14th century type (splayed and tabled with undersquinted abutments).

No 41 High Street. The irregular plan shape suggests that the house was formerly two separate dwellings with a thick stone wall between them. The east part formerly had a gable facing the street (now gone) while the west part has a narrower span, its roof lying parallel to the street. Both roofs have tie-and collar trusses with former windbraces, probably late 15th or early 16th century. At first floor level of the east part a tie-beam (T4) has remarkable painted chevron patterns (fig 8) in red, white and green with zig-zag black lines and tiny fleurs-de-lis; (chevron patterns of the 16th century have been recorded in Essex (6) and at no 1 Catherine Street, Exeter). This ornamentation suggests that the upper room was the principal chamber; it has an added 16th century fireplace. The room below was a shop and the kitchen at the back still has a large lateral stack and a stone-slated roof. The west front room has a framed ceiling and inserted 17th century fireplace; the back room was added in the 18th century.

Nos 20 and 24 High Street. The remaining buildings come last in this section being the most difficult to interpret. No 20 is a small infill structure between nos 18 and 24 and the latter incorporates an excellent example of a 15th century shop front in the wing. The whole front range of no 24, shown hatched on plan (fig 6), was rebuilt in the 19th century. **No 24** is an L-shaped building, its rebuilt front range along the High Street with a passageway

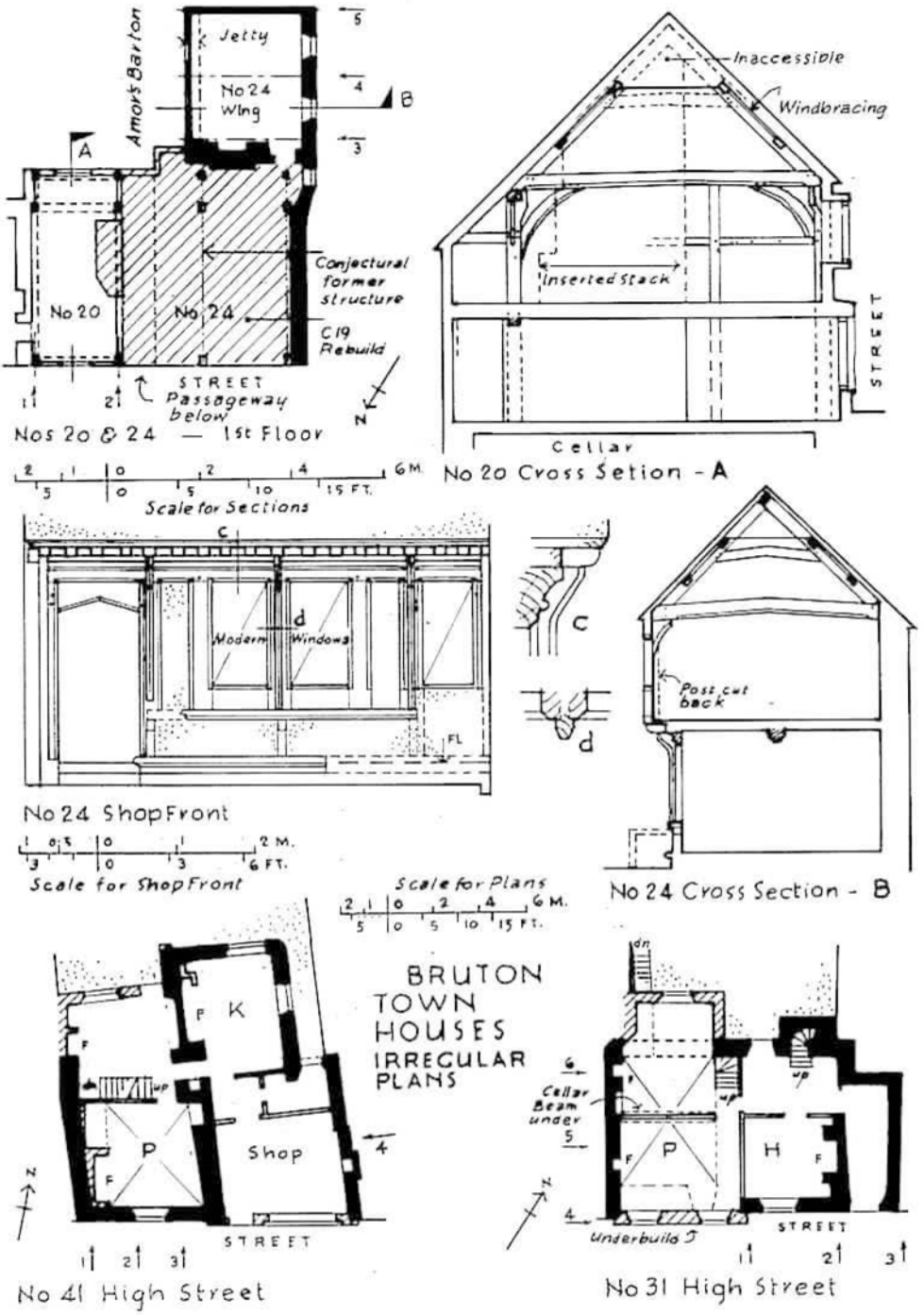

Fig. 6 Irregular Plans

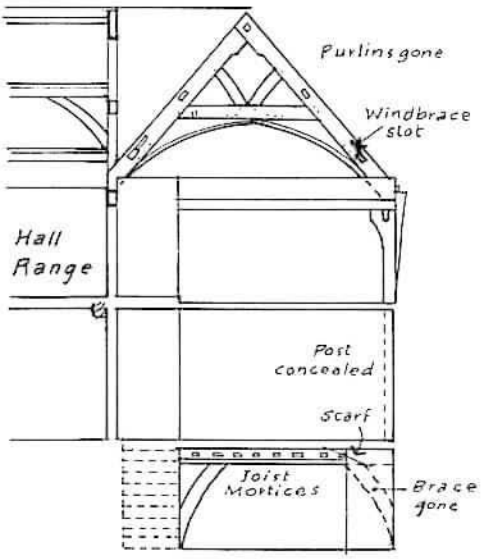

Fig. 7 No 31 High Street, Wing, Cross Section

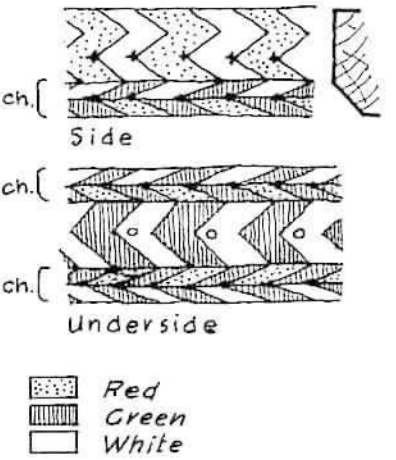

Fig. 8 No 41 High Street, Painted Beam, chamber

beneath it at street level. This gives public access to a steep lane called Amor's Barton, leading down to the river. The rear wing has a jettied timber front facing the Barton with the shop front below. The jetty joists and the axial beam have provided a tree-ring felling date of the summer of 1430. The shop front has the cut-off stubs of projecting display frames at window cill level, the windows themselves being modern. **No 20** comprises one single bay of a semi-aisled timber structure squeezed between the end wall of no 18 and the rebuilt front range of no 24. The construction is totally unlike that of the other buildings; there are no stone walls, timbers are crude and heavy, there is a single aisle with a square set arcade plate at the rear and there is no front jetty. Arcade plate and tie-beam have yielded a single felling date of the spring of 1462.

It seems likely that formerly this rogue structure extended west-wards across the front of no 24 and was of 3 equal bays; the two missing bays neatly fit the frontage of no 24. No 24 itself may have had a front range at an earlier date, the single unit wing being unlikely to have stood on its own. If this is so, no 20 and its assumed extension would have replaced the original front range of no 24 some 32 years after it was built. It is not known what function this unusual structure fulfilled. It may have been built for workshops or warehousing for the woollen cloth trade – it certainly had no domestic use as its only chimney stack is quite a late insertion and its heavy construction strongly suggests warehousing.

IN CONCLUSION

Three aspects of our Survey immediately stand out – the similarity of structure in the older buildings, the dominance of the two-room central-entry plan and the almost total absence of houses built gable-end on to the street.

Structures and Dates. Structures comprise stone back and side walls with, in the older houses, timber fronts, some jettied; roof details in these houses bear a strong family resemblance. The four structures that have been dated by tree-ring analysis provide erection

dates from 1430 to 1462, somewhat earlier than expected, and similarity of structure has allowed other buildings to be similarly dated with some confidence. Thus the date of 1454 for nos 16 and 18 High Street is considered to be a good pointer to the date of the basically similar Priory House; this accords well with Prior Henton's office (from 1448 to 1495) whose rebus and initials appear on the building. Seven other houses with almost identical roof structures can by analogy be dated to within the latter half of the 15th century (fig 9).

The Old School House, isolated in Plox, although with a very similar roof to the foregoing, is entirely stone built with arch headed mullioned windows. The school was not endowed until 1519 but may have been in existance as early as 1509, so, unless the house was built previously and adapted to school use, perhaps this roof-type did extend into the early years of the 16th century.

The two-room central-entry plan was very widely adopted in Bruton. It was no doubt the outcome of practical considerations and owed nothing to a desire for symmetry, this aspect not becoming important until after the Reformation; in our survey that would only apply to the Old Brewery House. The restrictions imposed by the two-room plan are clearly demonstrated by the almost universal adoption of rear wings, either integral or added. The date range of the type is large, from the 15th to at least the 17th century, and the plot width too varies widely from 8.0m/27'0" to 12.5m/41'0". The central entrances of the two-room houses clearly gave customer access to the shops and probably to the large number of trade outbuildings in the rear of the plots. This is known to be the case in the Old Brewery House where the outbuildings ran all down the west side of the plot to the back lane. The 1839 Tithe Map shows similar aggregations of outbuildings at nos 7 and 9 Patwell Street and nos 16 and 18 High Street. By the middle of the 19th century many such buildings in the Bartons had been converted into small cottages; e.g. in The Square and in Amor's Barton. The so called Bartons were not merely footways leading down from the High Street but, as the name implies, were enclosed yards or areas of activity which, in the case of Amor's Barton at least, included a shop. (A lease (7) of 1664 refers to a dye-house and a little shop "adjoining the entry to a tenement", which might well be no 24.)

The Town Layout. The consistency of layout in Bruton with houses built parallel to the street gives the impression of deliberate planning and, as all the earlier houses appear to be of the mid to late 15th century, it could be suggested that a great rebuilding may have taken place at that times to some extent at least under the direction of the Priory as the principal landowner. The comparatively wide frontages we see in Bruton are usually associated with semi-rural type developments not subject to high premiums being placed on main street frontages as is the case in dense-packed commercial centres where houses, often 3 storeys high, have single room frontages, their gables facing the street and the rooms running back into the narrow plots. This is the usual plan for town houses in the south-west of England (Taunton (8), Exeter, Dartmouth etc (9)). The two-room frontage plan is seen only rarely in Taunton and then only in houses of the late 17th century onwards. Robert Taylor has said that the more usual single room frontage plan extends over most of Devon and part of Somerset including Taunton and Bridgwater, but that the two-room frontage plan can be seen to be dominant in Crewkerne, Sherborne and Dorchester. He suggests it may extend further east and we have certainly proved the point in Bruton and have observed it in Wincanton too. Is this, as Taylor implies, a matter of regional variation or is it, as seems to us more likely, a question of scale?

Aston and Leech have suggested that Bruton's medieval core extended no further west than the boundary of Sexey's Hospital and no further east than the Quaperlake Mill (2), an opinion supported by the fact that all our earlier examples fall within this area except for the Old School House south of the river.

The suggestions and generalisations we have made arise from a very limited number of examples. It is hoped that others may be able to undertake a more comprehensive town survey so as to pursue these matters further.

Fig. 9.

TABLE 1. ANALYSIS OF HOUSES DESCRIBED.

HOUSE	PLAN			STRUCTURE					DATE	
	type	frontage	span	integral wing	similar roofs[++]	jetty	cambered tiebeam	bay size	dendro	assessed
no 9 Patwell St.	2-room.	8.0m	5.0m		*	*	*	2.8m		mid C15
no 7 Patwell St.	central	10.0	4.2					2.0		C16/C17
no 3 High St.	entry	11.5	5.5	*	*		*	2.8		mid C15
nos 9, 11 high St.		10.0	6.0		*	*?	*	3.2		mid C15
no 78 High St.		11.5	4.5	*				3.0		C16/C17
Old School House		14.0	4.6	*	*		*	3.0		mid C15
Old Brewery House		12.5	6.0					2.5		early C17
nos 16, 18 High St.	continuous	18.0	6.2		*	*		2.4	1454	
Priory House	jetty ranges	20.0	6.2		*	*		2.2		mid C15
no 31 High St. (Cellar)	irregular plan	11.5	6.0	*	*	*	*	3.5	1453/4 (c1295)	
no 41 High St.		9.0	5.0	*	*	*?	*	3.5		C15/C16
no 24 High St.		7.5	5.0	*	*	*	*	2.5	1430	
no 20 High St.	(single aisle)	4.0	6.2				*	4.0	1462	

[++] for similar roof structures see no 24 High Streeet, fig 6

FOOTNOTES

1. Generally, we are indebted to Dr R. Dunning who has given valuable advice on Bruton History.
2. M. Aston & R.H. Leech, *Historic Towns in Somerset, Archaeology and Planning* 1977.
3. We are indebted to John Bishton for identifying the older houses and for arranging access and introductions.
4. Tree-ring dating by Dan Miles as part of the Somerset Dendrochronological Project, coordinator John Dallimore, SVBRG.
5. see W. Wheatley's watercolour drawing of Priory House (1846) inscribed "Remains of the Old Town Hall and Market House, Bruton. The quarter sessions was formerly occasionally held here." SANHS Library.
6. Information kindly supplied to John McCann by Muriel Carrick regarding examples in Essex.
7. Wiltshire RO 383 (Hoare MSS) 326.
8. R. Taylor, "Town Houses in Taunton, 1500–1700", *Post Medieval Archaeology*, vol 8, 1974.
9. M. Laithwaite, "Town Houses up to 1600", *Devon Building*, ed. Peter Beacham, 1990.

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