

## A short History of The Ancient House, Thetford

The charming black and white building known as the Ancient House is among the principal attractions of the town of Thetford in Norfolk. Indeed, it probably ranks as one of the best examples of an early Tudor town house in East Anglia. The elaborate oak ceiling of the main room has in particular been justly praised. The house is now a museum of Thetford and Breckland, but this description will refer only to the history and architecture of the building itself.

None of the documents at present available sheds any light upon who built the house or when. Though the conveyance of 1921 (when the house was given to the town) speaks of its erection in the reign of Edward IV (1461-83), architectural details point to a date soon after 1500. Clearly it was the home of a merchant of some wealth, who wished to model his dwelling on the larger mansions of the day and was prepared to pay for the best craftsmen in its construction. He seems to have been restricted in the size of the site at his disposal, however, and was probably constrained by earlier boundaries on both sides. Nevertheless the house would have been detached when first built, with perhaps a carriage entrance at the side.

Almost all we know about the house has to be deduced from a study of its architecture. Various alterations were made over the centuries, so that the Ancient House now enjoys a





Detail of Hall ceiling

distinctive character resulting from the interesting mixture of styles. The construction is a timber frame of oak, with the upright beams or 'studs' set very close together. Filling in the spaces between is the material called wattle-and-daub, described later, or in some places brick. The front of the house is white-plastered between the timber framework. Flint, chalk and bricks are used in the foundations. As is typical in town houses of this age, the upper storey, obviating the need for very long straight timbers to support a two-storey frontage, giving more space in the upper rooms, and protecting the lower parts from rain.

The house as we see it now consists of a block about eleven metres long fronting White Hart Street, and another block about thirteen-and-a-half metres long at right angles to it at the rear. As we look at White Hart Street frontage, we can see that its original appearance has been greatly altered by the insertion of windows of much later date. The bow window, now such an attractive feature of the building, is really quite out of keeping with the style of the house. Together with a Georgian door and six sash windows it probably dates from about 1800. The roof too is out of keeping, being a low-pitched nineteenth century slate one. When first built it would have been of much steeper pitch.

Of the original exterior features of the house, the most notable is the unusually prominent high hooded canopy over the doorway. It is decorated with a carved shield and rose. Other timbers on the house front are also carved and moulded. Immediately to the left of the front door as we look at it is a very narrow blocked-up doorway, with a carved arched head of the 'four-centred' type. It would have led directly into one of the south rooms of the house, no doubt used as a shop by the house's owner. What he sold there we do not know. Its closeness to the front door once led to the story that it was a 'watchman's box', but there is no evidence for this.

The layout of the original house was very simple. On the ground floor a large room, the hall, was separated by a wooden partition or screen from a passage running from front to back of the house, leading to a small courtyard at the rear. On the other side of the passage were two small rooms.

Upstairs were one large and one smaller room used as living and sleeping apartments. This layout has been restored almost to its former state.

The visitor first enters the passageway, which leads straight through to the new pavilion, with the hall on the right. The passage floor is now paved with the large square red tiles known in East Anglia as pamments. The panelled and moulded oak screen has two open doorways into the main room. It is also open at the top, where it is divided by fifteen mullions.

The hall measures five metres by six and is graced by an exceptionally fine decorated oak ceiling, with intricate carving and moulding. The massive main beam runs across the centre of the room from front to back and is supported on brackets carved with flower, shield and other motifs, repeating the decoration of the door canopy. The brackets rest on capitals of shafts now missing. A longer beam, in two halves, spans the length of the room and into it are mortised the joists of the floor above. All except one of these are carved at each end. The plain one is over the fireplace; it appears to be original and why it should have been left plain is not known. The carved decoration of the beams is carried around the walls in a frieze, which, at the north end, is elaborated into decorative openwork.

When the room was restored the large open fireplace was revealed, but only part of the splendid carved oak lintel could be rescued. About half the brickwork is in its original state.

The recesses above the fireplace may once have held texts.



Carved fireplace lintel

One can imagine a roaring log fire blazing on the hearth, with a large joint of meat roasting above, but much of the cooking would actually have been done in a separate kitchen area.

Most of the oak studs and wall material in this room are original, except where a Georgian doorway was taken out at the north-east corner (the end nearest the top of the street)

and a nineteenth century staircase at the south-west corner. Many marks of chipping deface the studs: this is where they were hacked to take the plaster which was once laid over them. When first built, the walls would not have been plastered in this way; they would be much as they are now covered with wall hangings of some kind. Dark stains left by nails are not, as many people believe, evidence that the beams are re-used ships' timbers, but are the result of fixing different kinds of wall-coverings over the years. A mystery piece of carved arch set apparently at random into the wall may be connected with a former window (this was once an outside wall), or it could have been displaced when the above-mentioned staircase was constructed.

In all probability the house's original stairway was located just to the left of the fireplace and chimney stack, where the short connecting passage to the back rooms is now. It may well have been spiral, as the space available was limited. The floor of the main room was re-laid with bricks taken from other parts of the house at the time of the restoration in 1923-4.

Across the 'screens passage' there is now only one room, a step above the level of the rest of the ground floor. The two original small rooms, the front one of which formed the shop, seem to have been knocked into one at a fairly early date. The doorway to the rear half has been blocked with wattle-and-daub. The nature of this material can be clearly seen here; it is a mixture of clay, chalk, straw and even some pebbles, plastered onto upright pieces of wood. The wood shows through in places. East Anglian wattle-and-daub tends



Hall displays

to lack the closely-woven wattles used as a base for the daub which we normally associate with this kind of walling.

This south room has a small cellar underneath, entered through a trapdoor. It was probably excavated quite a long

Upper window



time after the building of the house. In it there are three arched recesses of chalk block which supported a fireplace formerly in the room above.

The back wall of the south room was once an outside wall, which explains the open 'lights' to the present stairway. They are actually a window, once glazed, and made redundant by the building of a stairway block at the rear. At some time late in the sixteenth century the owner of the house decided that he needed a more spacious stairway to replace the cramped one by the chimney stack. An extension was built out to accommodate it, having three storeys and a separate gabled roof at the back. The stairs continue beyond the first floor to the present loft without any narrowing, which indicated that the space under the roof was a third storey used for servants' quarters or storage before the roof pitch was altered. The loft has a fully boarded floor, and reports suggest that there were traces of dormer windows in the previous roof. When the modern roof was constructed, the original timbers were cut and re-used.

Where the stairs lead to the first floor rooms there is a small internal window for borrowed light, glazed with eighteenth- or nineteenth- century bullseye glass. Traces of a true window exist here too, on the wall of the stairway to the loft. Other blocked-up windows can just be made out elsewhere.

The two upstairs rooms, particularly the larger, have good oak ceilings with moulded beams, though not richly carved like the rooms below. In the smaller room- entered first- part of the

Rear view of the Ancient House



More herringbone noggin is exposed in the other room. Quite probably the whole of the street frontage was originally bricked in this way, and not plastered over. In the smaller room, as elsewhere, a groove cut into the beam above the windows can be seen. This was to allow movement of shutters for the earlier windows, which were probably in much the same position.

The larger room was a secondary living room as well as a bedroom. The fireplace is smaller than that of the hall below; its brick sides are original, and the rest is built up from other bricks found in the house. Some idea of the nature of the earlier windows on the street front can be deduced. There may well have been a T-shaped arrangement on the north side of the central beam (to the left as you look at it): a central window, possibly an oriel, with two small high windows on either side. The present small windows may be in the same position as the originals, but their mouldings seem to date from about 1600. Some of the yellowish panes of glass in them could be seventeenth century; the names scratched on them are modern.

From the landing window can be seen the two-storey rear block with its steep pantiled roof. Parts of the wall are in flint-and-brick or chalk blocks, but the section nearest the street is partially timber-framed. There are exposed beams in what is now the Curator's office and the room below, which is part of the display area. Other rooms are used as stores and are not open to the public. One of them is a kitchen with a timbered ceiling, and a large fireplace which has at some time been

divided up into sections for a range, oven and washing 'copper'. The kitchen block was first used, perhaps pre-dating the main building and belonging to an earlier house on the site. Later it was replaced by another, still detached, kitchen block, which was eventually joined to the house by a connecting room. These alterations could have been complete by 1600.

When the Ancient House was first opened as a museum, the rear wing was used as living accommodation for the caretaker. It had evidently been in use as a self-contained cottage well before this and had been equipped with nineteenth-century fireplaces and an extra stairway.



1901 period Kitchen displays

Over the centuries the White Hart Street block was greatly modified, by being divided into two dwellings (not including the rear wing). The two upstairs rooms were partitioned into four, the large room downstairs into two. The present front door and staircase belonged to one dwelling, later to be number 21 White Hart Street, while the rest of the house (nearest the top of the street) was served by another door and a new staircase. This was 23 White Hart Street. Both sections were once used as shops: 23 in the nineteenth century and 21 early in this century.

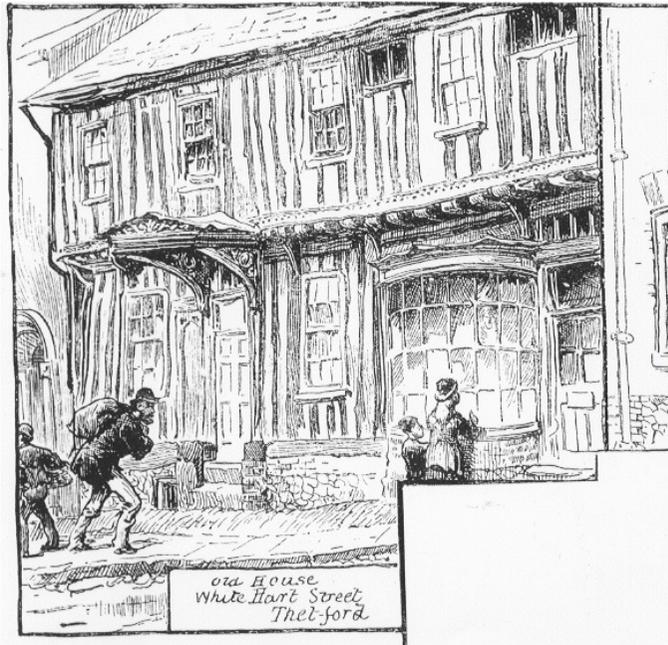
The rooms were provided with nineteenth-century fireplaces; it was the rebuilding of a chimney for one of these which badly mutilated the original carved oak lintel. Walls and ceilings were flat-plastered, or boarded and papered, completely obscuring the fine timbers; the front of the house was also plastered over. Alterations severely damaged the oak screen, which has been restored.

The house first attracted attention again in 1867, when a local historian writes that 'two interesting Elizabethan studded houses were discovered in White Hart Street upon the removal of the external plaster'. Sketches of the house made in the late nineteenth century show that its external appearance was then much the same as it is today: for example C.J. Staniland's drawing in *The Graphic* for October 1887, and C.G. Harper's sketch in his book *The Newmarket, Bury, Thetford and Cromer Road*, 1904.

In 1921, the Mayor of Thetford consulted the local antiquary Prince Frederick Duleep Singh MVO FSA about setting up a museum in the town. The Prince very generously responded by purchasing the Ancient House and presenting it to the Mayor and Corporation of Thetford for this purpose. With the advice of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the house was carefully restored- the cost having been estimated at £550, to which the Prince contributed. Extra stairways, doors, fireplaces and partitions were removed, and the plaster stripped to reveal the unsuspected richness of carving underneath. On December 11th 1924, the museum was opened by the Duchess of Grafton. Administration continued with Thetford Borough Council until the museum became part of Norfolk Museums Service in 1974.



Prince Frederick Duleep Singh,  
benefactor of the Ancient House



The Ancient House  
by C.J.Staniland 1887

As to previous owners of the house, we can learn a little from the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century deeds which are preserved. It was usual at that time for the house to be let, so that the owner was rarely the occupier. In 1794 John Tyrrell, a woolcomber, left the house in his will to his daughters Mary, Ann and Elizabeth (who was married to local grocer John Juler). The occupier at this time was a carpenter called James

Mills. In 1802 a famous local character and innkeeper at the Bell, Elizabeth Radcliffe, purchased it for £300. She seems to have lived in part of the house for a time, and left it in her will of 1826 to Joseph Gifford and James Fison (a founder and of the fertiliser firm) in trust for Edward Gifford. After his death the house was auctioned at the Red Lion in 1849, and bought for £360 by Edward Frost, who owned the local tannery. At the time of the sale, the house was occupied by Samuel Abel, a saddler, and Harvey Parry, a miller, and was described as a double dwelling house with outhouses, stable, gig house, yard and carriage entrance to 'the Back Street'. (1860s) Robert Peter Browne was a 'plumber of this town' in Victorian Thetford. He had a plumber's shop here on the ground floor of the Ancient House. As well as being a plumber - he was a decorator and a gas fitter. Browne also became a local politician and he features in the cartoons by 'Aegena' which are displayed here. By the end of the century the northern half was the plumber's shop of one Horace Howlett, Thanks to the 1901 population census, we know the Newton family lived in half of the house at this time, along with four lodgers. There was Thomas Newton, his wife Emily, their three children and Thomas's brother. At that time the Ancient House was split into numbers 21 and 23 White Hart Street. Before the Great War the southern half was the watchmaker's shop of John Kemp Main. John Kemp Main was a Watch and Clock Repairer who lived and worked at the Ancient House in about 1916.

So far, these scanty details are all that is known of the past life of the house. It is hoped that further information will come to light to enable a more complete picture to be drawn.