

**HEREFORD HOUSE
24, HIGH STREET
DROITWICH
WR9 8ES**



**FINAL REPORT
on the building's architectural interest for
THE HISTORIC DROITWICH PROJECT
Supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund**

March 2017

Hereford House, 24 High Street, Droitwich (SO 90042 63341)

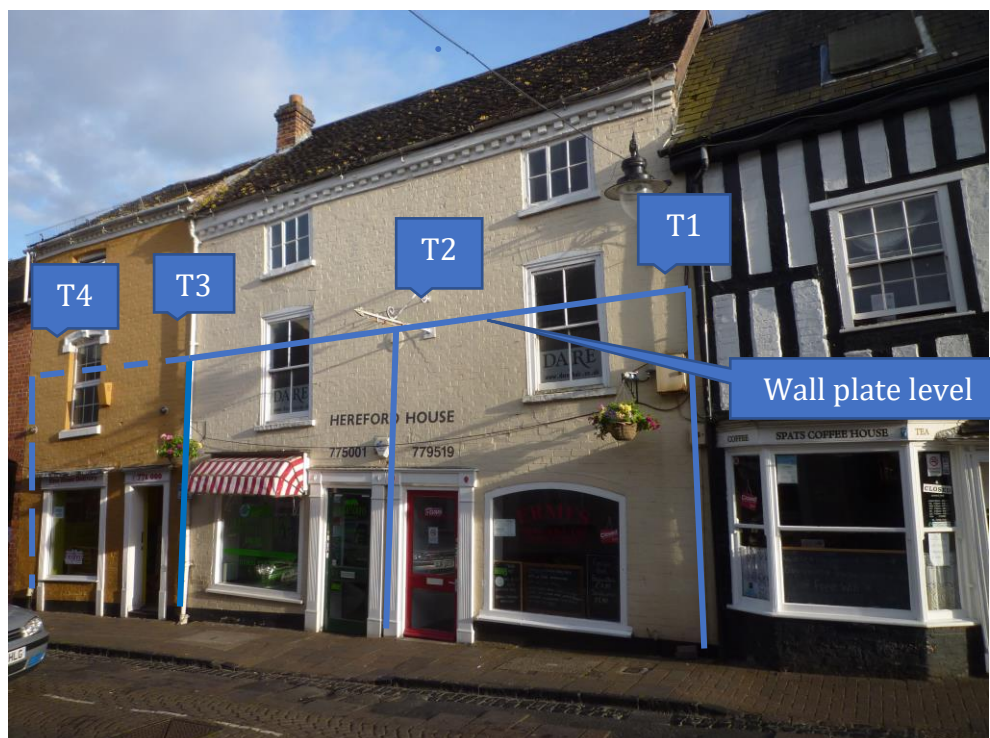
Background

The National Heritage List entry (number 1296665) for this building dates from 1973 when it was first listed and describes it thus:

Mid C19. 3 storeys. Painted brick. Tile roof. 2 small casements with bars on 2nd floor. 2 sashes with cambered heads and unbarred on 1st floor. 2 sashes down, one with margin lights. Centre door, 6 flush panels, moulded wood case, shallow moulded cornice on brackets. Brick modillion eaves course.

It gives no indication of the much earlier building that is visible inside. Admittedly the compilers of the list based their descriptions on external inspection and only rarely, when invited inside by owners, were they able to see the interiors.

The building has however attracted attention because of the impact of subsidence. Photographs of the interior in the early 20th century when it operated as a public house called The Waggon & Horses show how the tilting floors and uneven surfaces created a curiosity which led to its more popular name as The Crooked House.¹ The same photographs also show that its interior then had little sign of exposed framing; the walls at ground and first floor level were painted, panelled or papered. How long the frame now visible at first floor level has been exposed is not known but it is indeed fortunate that it can now be seen as it reveals important evidence for an earlier house of very considerable interest.



¹ Peter McMillan & Christine Donnelly *Droitwich Spa Memory Lane* (n.d) 22-23

Description

Exposed within the first floor of the front or street range are three timber-framed trusses (T1-T3 drawings). They represent the divisions between two bays of a late medieval house whose ridge must originally have been roughly at the same height as the top of the second floor windows. The position of the wall plate at current first floor window level has been marked on the annotated photograph.

Each truss is of tiebeam form and although parts are still concealed by plaster there is sufficient to show their original form. Above the tiebeams are queen struts or peghole evidence for their presence, but the tops of the struts must have extended to collars that are now hidden by the ceiling of the first-floor rooms and floor joists for the top floor. In these upper rooms later cladding mainly hides any evidence for the apex of the timber frame, although in the western end wall against Spats, 22 High Street, the cladding has in part been removed since our initial visit revealing the principal rafters and collar of T1 and a guide to the original pitch of the roof. At first-floor level there are surviving curved windbraces or at least mortices showing their position. In T3 close observation of the windbrace mortice shows two sets of pins for a second brace extending eastwards into what is now no 26 High Street (for which see below).

The main posts and the partial survival of the wall plate demarcate the line of the back wall. Towards the street frontage the arrangement was different in that the floored bay between T1 and T2 was jettied. The front posts in both T2 and T3 each have a long mortice approximately 300mm (1') above the present floor level. Its form is shown in T2 where the slanted top reveals it was an upward brace that would have met the underside of the now lost front wall plate. There are no wattle grooves in the sides of the post so that this was open both above and below the brace. These front posts, unlike the rest of their respective trusses show signs of exposure to the weather. In both T2 and T3 there is a second vertical post set 650mm (2' 1½") back from the front post carrying the wall plate. Both of these extra posts have a mortice 300mm (1') below the tiebeam for a plate or rail that connected the recessed frontage.

The upper face of T2 is to the east where there is a set of scribed carpenter's marks on the joints of the tiebeam. This side of the truss also shows evidence of smoke blackening, suggesting that the bay between T2 and T3 was an open hall. Towards the southern end the tiebeam has been cut out in relatively modern times to accommodate a doorway into bay T1-T2.

Interpretation & Significance

The three surviving trusses provide evidence to show that these are two bays of a medieval townhouse, the western bay T1-T2 being floored, the eastern bay T2-T3 being an open hall. The details of the jetty arrangement to the street frontage shows that the hall bay had a recessed front wall but that the wall plate continued along the whole frontage and had curved braces. The plate along the top of the front wall probably demarcates the position of a coving that once filled the gap behind the braces.

These are all diagnostic features of a type of structure that architectural historians have dubbed the Wealden house. It gained this name because fieldworkers in the mid-20th century found so many examples in southeast England where it was identified in both town and country. Since then research has shown that the type has a wider distribution with examples as far north as the Lake District, Yorkshire and East Anglia. In the most recent study of the building type Dr Nat Alcock has plotted nearly 800 examples, drawing attention to the significant number to be found in medieval towns in Warwickshire and Herefordshire.² Until now no examples have been found in Worcestershire, a somewhat anomalous situation given their presence in neighbouring counties.³

This discovery of the first Wealden house in Worcestershire provides a classic example of how difficult they are to detect when the original structure has been refaced. When their front walls survive they are readily identifiable from outside because of the classic recess and arch-braced flying wall plate across the line of the hall with jettied bays either side. But the situation is radically different when the fieldworker assesses the exterior of a building like Hereford House where there are no clues to what lies behind the façade.

The western side or upper face of T1 is visible at first floor level in the neighbouring property, no 22 High Street (Spats coffee house), a building for which a dendro date of 1656 has now been obtained. A glazed panel in the timber-framed side wall of no 22 enables one to see part of the tiebeam/collar and wattle infill panel of the much lower end truss of no 24.

The evidence for a third bay at the east end of no 24 has already been set out. With this in mind permission was obtained from the proprietor of no 26 (Caspian Pizza) to see whether more of the frame survived behind the mid-19th century brickwork of the street frontage. The interior is wholly plastered and there is no indication of any of the frame having been incorporated into the brick rebuild. The building is just one bay wide and inside the indications are that the previous building was entirely erased in the renewal process. However, if we project a third bay of the original Wealden into no 26, which we know from the structural evidence once existed, we arrive at an estimated frontage of 12.2m (40'). This makes an entirely reasonable plan for a classic tripartite Wealden house with a central recessed hall, together with service and upper ends in the jettied end bays. Whether it extended as a terrace any further as separate tenements is unclear but the possibility must be considered. Terraces of Wealdens recorded in Coventry seem to have comprised contracted halls with a narrow solar chamber over a passage and partly extending over the hall with coeval rear wings. The whole ground floor

² Nat Alcock 'The Distribution and Dating of Wealden Houses' *Vernacular Architecture* 41 (2010) 37-44

³ In 2007 it could be said that 'a building type which might have been expected in an urban context is the Wealden house, with its recessed bay for the open hall. However, whilst these occur in Warwickshire to the E and Herefordshire to the W none have been found in Worcestershire.' Stephen Price & Nicholas Molyneux 'The Domestic Timber-Framed Tradition' in Alan Brooks and Nikolaus Pevsner *The Buildings of England: Worcestershire* (Yale, 2007) 39

occupies a width of only 4.5m (15'). Whole terraces were constructed in what appear to have been low-cost speculative building.⁴ The Coventry terraces have the distinctive feature of square cut ends to the tiebeams at the back as opposed to the traditional sloping cut as dictated by the roof pitch.⁵ Our example shows no sign of such an arrangement for contemporary rear wings so is more likely to have been like the classic wide tripartite house.

A close parallel for this type is Mason's Court in Rother Street, Stratford-upon-Avon where the central hall is 4.05m (13'3") wide with a single jettied bay 4.05m wide at the south side and two more jettied bays on the north side, being 4.31m (14'1") and 4.41m (14'5") wide respectively. This gave the Stratford house a total street frontage of 16.76m (55').⁶ If for sake of argument we remove the fourth bay to compare it to the Droitwich house with three bays then we arrive at a frontage of 12.41m (41' 8") in Stratford and 12.2m (40') in Droitwich.

Dating

With the kind permission of the owner dendrochronology was undertaken by Ian Tyers in February 2016. Several bark edge cores from samples taken throughout the building gave felling dates of late spring/early summer of 1455, making it highly likely that construction took place within the next twelve months or so. Hitherto only two Wealden houses have so far been dated by dendrochronology in the wider West Midlands; a house at Weobley (Unicorn House, High Street) giving a date range of 1431-65 and Old Bell Cottages, Tanworth-in-Arden, Warwickshire with a felling date of 1449.⁷ Some Wealdens in Hampshire and Sussex have been dated to the 14th century, but on the basis of current understanding, most date to the 15th century. The house at Stratford can be closely dated because documentary evidence shows that under the terms of the lease it was to be finished within two years between 1481-3. The origins of Hereford House as a closely dateable mid-15th century Wealden is an important addition to the growing national database of the chronology of the building type. As the first Wealden to be identified in Worcestershire it should encourage fieldworkers to persist looking for them in the county's historic towns, taking heart that as at Droitwich they may well still exist behind very much later frontages.

⁴ S. R. Jones & J. T. Smith 'The Wealden Houses of Warwickshire and their Significance' *Transactions of the Birmingham Archaeological Society* **79** (1964) 24-35

⁵ I am most grateful to Stanley Jones for his advice on the distinctive features of the Wealden terraces in Coventry. For the most recent discussion of the Coventry terraces known as renter rows see Bob Meeson & Nat Alcock 'Black Swan Terrace, Upper Spon Street, Coventry: A Comparison of Medieval Renters' *Vernacular Architecture* **47** (2016) 1-19

⁶ Nicholas A D Molyneux 'Mason's Court Rother Street Stratford-upon-Avon Warwickshire' (English Heritage typescript report 2014)

⁷ Alcock op.cit. 2010, 39-40

Acknowledgments

When visiting Spat's Coffee House at 22 High Street with Claire Lloyd in March 2015, I was intrigued by the presence of a timber-framed structure associated with the adjoining property (no 24) visible by a glazed panel in the side wall. Lyn Blewitt and Claire Lloyd subsequently visited no 24 and alerted me to the survival of the rest of the first floor frame. I am very grateful indeed to the owner Robert Pritchard for allowing access for recording purposes and dendrochronology and to Ermi and her team at the sandwich bar in 24C for welcoming us. Gulfraz Mohammed manager at no 26 (Caspian Pizza Takeaway) kindly allowed access to his premises. Peter Walker's help is also acknowledged with recording and internal photography. I also owe thanks to Nicholas Molyneux for sharing his unpublished research on Mason's Court, Stratford and to Stanley Jones for sharing his wide experience of recording Wealden houses in the Midlands.



T1



T2



T3



T2 – west or lower face



T3 – west or lower face



26 High Street – north or street elevation



The upper part of the medieval roof truss T1 in the course of being uncovered against the west wall. The apex is hidden behind the later stack.



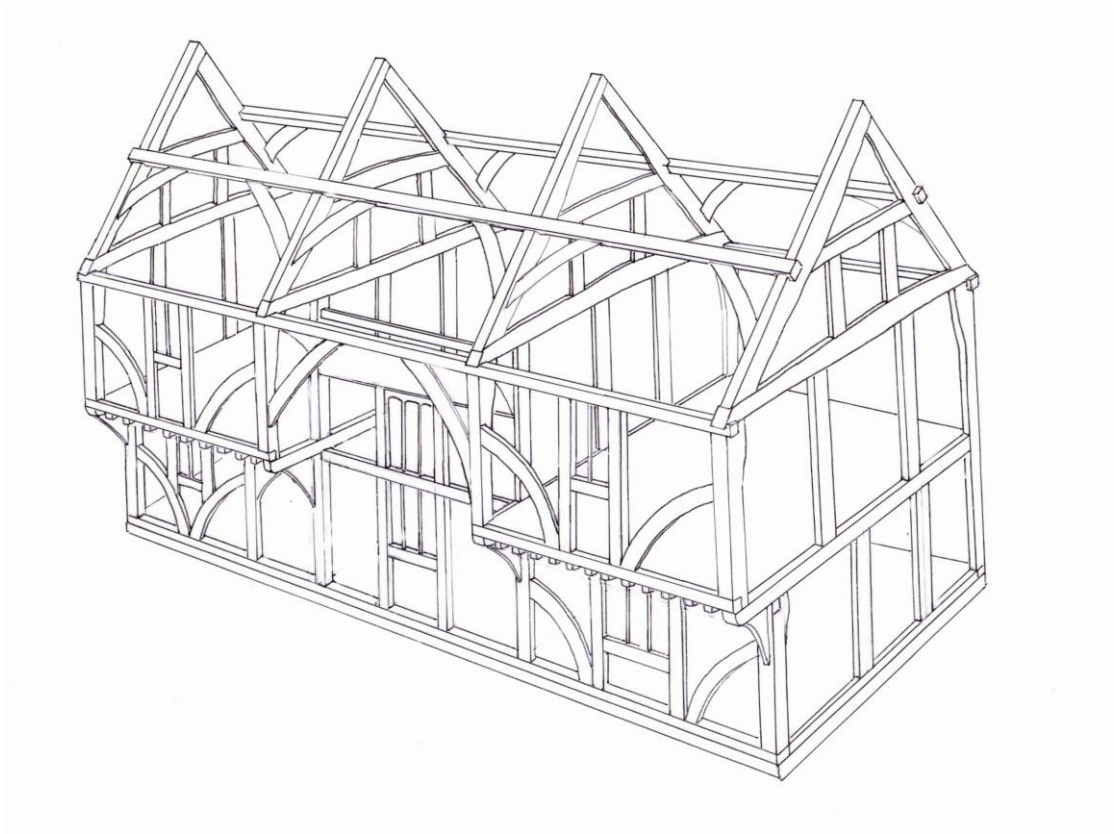
The west or upper face of part of T3 visible from within Spat's Coffee House at 22 High Street. The wattle infill woven round vertical staves is clearly visible. Photograph by courtesy of Paul Jones LRPS.



Mason's Court, Rother Street, Stratford-upon-Avon



Mason's Court, Stratford-upon-Avon. The jettied bays either side the open hall and arch-braced wall plate with its coving in front of the hall window give an impression of what Droitwich's Wealden house would once have looked like.



Reconstruction drawing of the frame of Hereford House as it may have appeared towards completion at the end of 1455 or the first half of 1456 (Stephen Price).