

PROCEEDINGS

OF THE

Cambridge Antiquarian Society,

LENT TERM. 27 JANUARY—16 MARCH 1908.

WITH

Communications

MADE TO THE SOCIETY.

No. L.

BEING No. 3 OF THE TWELFTH VOLUME.

(SIXTH VOLUME OF THE NEW SERIES.)



Cambridge :

DEIGHTON, BELL & CO.; BOWES & BOWES.

LONDON: G. BELL AND SONS.

1908

Price Five Shillings net.

Monday, 24 February, 1908.

Dr VENN, President, in the Chair.

The following papers were read :

THE RINGS UNDER THE EAVES OF OLD HOUSES.

(Illustrated by lantern slides.)

BY G. E. WHERRY, M.A., M.C.

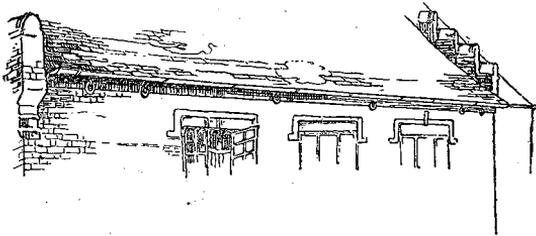
In Cambridge and the near neighbourhood there are to be found thirteen houses with strong iron rings fixed beneath the eaves, arranged at regular intervals of about six to ten feet, and apparently intended for the same purpose.

The rings are three or four inches in diameter and are usually firmly fixed into the roof plate: they are sometimes difficult to find unless the observer takes trouble, being hidden by the beam-end ornaments or sprockets, which cast dark shadows and obscure the view. The houses are mostly of the seventeenth century; some have been much altered and have had Mansarde roofs placed over them, but especially in the frontage have been modernised by shop fronts and new windows.

One of the houses is in the village of Trumpington; another is the Globe Inn on the Newmarket Road, past the ancient Stourbridge Chapel of St Mary Magdalene, and on the same side of the way. Eight others are in the Borough of Cambridge; they are the Lion Hotel in Petty Cury; the Hoop Hotel and two other houses in Bridge Street, Nos. 48 and 60; in Trinity Street, No. 27; in Sidney Street, No. 22; in Bene't Street, No. 5; and the Master's Lodge of Peterhouse. There is one ringed house at Newmarket, and two are at Linton.

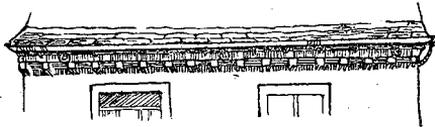
The house at Trumpington is one of the oldest; it has stepped gables, with good oak-work round the windows and

beneath the eaves, enriched with egg and tongue ornament. The roof-plate carries the iron rings as in the sketch. The



Old house with rings in Trumpington -village.

houses in Bridge Street and Bene't Street have over-hanging upper stories and other marks of antiquity.



Old house with rings in Bene't Street.

The Lion Hotel has had a modern glass roof placed over the courtyard. To see the rings it is necessary to look from the upstairs windows of the hotel.

A more recent house is the Master's Lodge at Peterhouse, bequeathed to the College by Charles Beaumont, the son of a former Master, and sometime Fellow of the College. The mansion is a square block of the Queen Anne period, not materially altered since the date of erection in 1702¹. The rings here are arranged all round the house.

The house at Newmarket has very wide projecting eaves and a double row of rings arranged alternately with another row next the house wall. The frontage has now three shop windows and bears a date 1832, but the roof appears to be of old design if not of old date.

At Linton are two old houses with the rings still in position, and Dr Palmer, a resident there, wrote in answer to my letter of

¹ Clark and Atkinson's *Cambridge*, and the Rev. Dr Walker's *History* of the College.

enquiry, as follows: "I am very pleased to be able to corroborate the statement about those hooks and rings. The rings were in a massive moulded oaken beam which was just under the eaves, and what is still more interesting, the beam on the other side of the house (away from the road) is still *in situ*, and the rings also. I saw them this morning (Oct. 1, 1907).

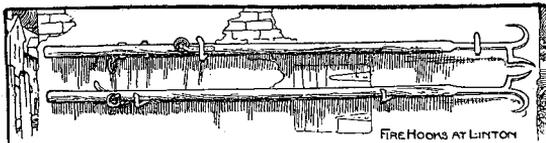
The house is an old one, early seventeenth century I should think, as I cannot trace it on a plan of 1559. It was beautifully panelled in oak in some of the rooms, which Fosdike sold when he beautified it. Some of the massive oak joists with bold mouldings now stand up in a corner of his backyard. If left there they will survive the new work for many generations. It must at one time have been a gentleman's house. In the time of the Millicent and Paris families, with residence here, particularly from 1550-1770, there were many connections of these families living at Linton. There is another house at Linton where the rings are still *in situ*, next door but one to Fosdike's, now a fancy shop. This was formerly (until four years ago) the Race Horse Inn. There is another building, now made into a shop, on the opposite side of the road; in this the beam under the eaves has been plastered over, but a row of staples can be seen projecting through the plaster. Whether these staples had rings or not they look as if they were intended for firehooks."

None of the houses mentioned here are thatched; in many of them the height is inconsiderable, and in some of the older houses the rings would be only about sixteen feet from the ground.

There have been many speculations as to the use of these rings. It is evident that they were not used to fasten any sort of sun blind, as they often hang over walls with a north aspect, and over spaces where there are no windows. Our secretary, Mr Foster, tells me that his father considered that the rings on the old house at Trumpington supported the stage at the performance of miracle-plays in the village. No doubt the Lion yard would have been a suitable place for plays of this character, and it is interesting to note how many of these houses are, or have been, Inns; but the number and

position of the houses still remaining to us makes any connexion with stage-plays highly improbable. It is said that in Ireland rings are used to fasten down the thatch of the roof, but the kind of house described above, together with the position of the rings, makes it unlikely that they served to fix the roof in any way; and at present I have not seen any such rings on a thatched house. In a few of the more recent houses the rings may have been useful in fastening ladders in house painting, in most of the old buildings it is obvious that no house painting was ever done.

In my view the rings were connected with the firehooks which were used in most towns and villages about here, ropes or hooks being fixed in the rings to pull down the roof or lower it or the walls. Perfect examples of firehooks are to be found at St Ives, Linton, and Longstanton, and probably other places in the county. The heavy iron part of one of the Cambridge firehooks is here before you by the kindness of Mr Greenwood, who preserves it in his church of St Bene't's. The wood has perished from long exposure when it hung outside the building. Dr Palmer has obtained for me the record of the manufacture of village firehooks and their cost. In the constable's accounts of the parish of Meldreth (Jonathan Stockbridge, 1723) there occur the following items:—March 30, he paid to Mr Lavender for two deal poles for the firehooks 6s. 0*d.* April 11, he paid George Kefford for his shaving and smoothing and work about the poles and hooks 8*d.* He paid for seven cart nails and one staple 3*d.* He paid for Thomas Barbor, the smith, for making the two firehooks which weighed 42½ pounds, at 4*d.* the pound, 14s. 2*d.* He paid Ephraim Skinner for two revits for them 3*d.* He paid Mr Jackson for oiling and colouring the poles and



hooks 2s. 0*d.* Thus each hook, as to the iron part, weighed about 21 lbs. The iron of the Cambridge firehook here before

you weighs 42 lbs., being thus twice the weight of those made for Meldreth village.

While the Linton firehooks were being sketched the artist was told by one of the villagers that the tradition of the place was that the hooks were used to drag on the rings, and pull off the roof in case of fire. Practical firemen to whom I have spoken have taken this view, and considered that the rings were thus used with the firehooks; and that when the house was a high one ropes and ladders were employed, the ropes being fastened to the rings for haulage, as has been pointed out to me by Mr Algernon Lyon, the former Captain of the Cambridge Fire Brigade. But with hooks over 20 feet long the low buildings could be attacked quite well without either ropes or ladders. It must be borne in mind that in the seventeenth century the method of dealing with fires was largely by destruction, and whenever the fire was well advanced the chief business was to save the adjacent houses. In the great fire of London in 1666, the State papers describe how the "Deputy Lieutenant and Justice of the Peace summoned the workmen with tools to be there by break of day." "In some Churches and Chapels are great hooks for pulling down houses which should be brought ready upon the place to-night against the morning." And again in Pepys' Diary he remarks "Now begins the practice of blowing up houses in Tower Street, those next the Tower, which at first did frighten people more than anything; but it stopped the fire where it was done, it bringing down the houses to the ground in the same places where they stood, and then it was easy to quench what little fire was in it, though it kindled nothing almost." The fire was burning in the cellars four months after the great event, and smoking, in spite of heavy rains, after six months.

In a book mentioned to me by Mr Atkinson, entitled, "the faithfull surveyour," published in 1638; George Attwell, alias Wells, "Teacher of the Mathematicks at Cambridge," has a chapter "of quenching an house on fire."

In quaint language he enables us to realise the feeble means at command for extinguishing fire except by destruction. "The instruments for this purpose," he writes, "(not to speak

of the water squirt which will throw an whole hogshead of water to the top of an house at once, for that such are scarce to be had save in some great Towns or Cities) are pikes, spits, mawkins¹, pikestaves, forks, wet blankets, ladders, buckets, scopets, pails: and the material, water, coaldust, turf-ashes, wood ashes, sand, horse-dung-dust, dirt, and in extremitie even drest grain itself. I know you will think it strange that I should mention pikes, and spits, dust, sand, and ashes, but I speak on often experience that four men that know how to use these things will sooner quench a fire than 100 that go to work with ladders and buckets to strip houses, and hooks to pull them down. It is a misery to speak it, when the rude multitude are once come together every man will have his own way. If it be a dwelling house some will busy themselves to carry out brass, pewter; but their chief aim is at the mony-chest whilest others wait to take it of them, others perhaps of more honesty, but less wit will be ripping the house, and so let the fire have the more air to burn the more violently that whereas they think thereby to save other houses that are near to it, they use for the most part the only way to fire them; for the greater the flame is, the more is the danger and the farther the sparks of fire will flie." It will be gathered from these remarks that it was not only in great fires that the firehooks were used, but that it was a common procedure in those days to pull down the burning buildings. Destruction rather than salvation was the rule, and serious attempts to quench the fire needed the advocacy of Mr Attwell. In England hand squirts were used up to the close of the seventeenth century. They were of brass and contained three or four quarts of water. A man held the handles at the sides and pressed against his chest, or two men held the handles and a third forced up the piston. The nozzle was dipped in water after each discharge, then raised and the water again forced out. So feeble an apparatus could have been of little use against the fierce conflagrations of our old wooden-built houses. Five of these brass squirts, the figures of which I have seen, until lately were preserved in the

¹ *Bailey's Dict.* 1727. Maulkin = a sort of mop made of clouts, to sweep an oven with, by some called a scovel.

vestry room of a church in Fenchurch Street (St Dionis Backchurch, now demolished), and an example is to be found in the Guildhall Museum. The fire-engines too were of the most feeble and inadequate description.

The history of the evolution of the modern fire-engine would need too long a digression, only it may be mentioned here that an excellent engine was designed about 150 B.C. by Hero of Alexandria. Late in the seventeenth century on the continent came the invention of an air-chamber to throw a continuous stream into the hose. It was well on into the eighteenth century before the old parish engine became usual, called in jest the "parish pint pot." It had to be wheeled or carried close to the fire and not rarely was itself burnt up, the firemen not having time to drag it away. These engines have appeared in parish records as "Indians for fier," and were probably inferior to our garden hose.

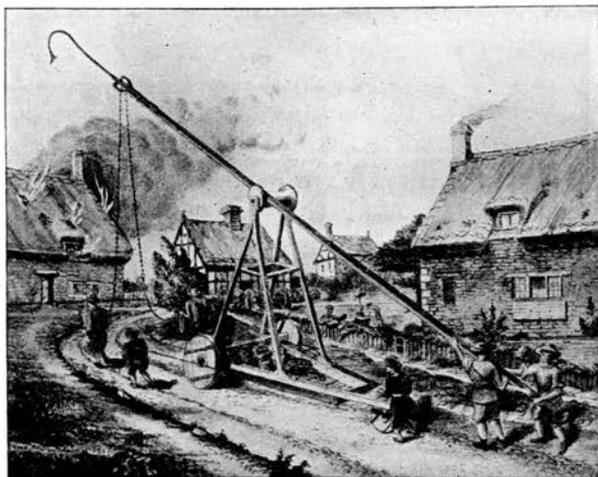
An engineer named John Braithwaite in 1829 invented a steam fire-engine which worked successfully, but was never taken up by the authorities, and the only recognition the inventor ever had was one sovereign given to his men after a successful quenching of a fire. One of the objections to the "steamer" was that it "threw too much water"!

With regard to Cambridge itself it appears from information obtained from Mr Greef, the present Captain of the Fire Brigade, that in 1791 the Royal Exchange, the Sun, and the Phoenix Fire Insurance Companies established a Fire Watch or Guard, and supported it at their own expense. In 1802 there was a fire-engine in the town, and in 1847 the Town Police Clause Act provided that "the Commissioners may purchase such Engines for extinguishing fires and other implements for safety or for use in case of fire and may employ a proper number of *persons* to act as firemen." A fireman was then sometimes a woman, and the parish engines in London were not rarely under the care of the wife of a sexton, or widow of a former engine-keeper. There is a credible account, in 1851, of an old lady with an umbrella directing the operations at a fire. Cambridge probably took early advantage of the Police Act, for the old manual engine belonging to the Borough

bears the date 1847, and was in use until the present Volunteer Brigade was formed in 1874.

It is evident that in Cambridge, as elsewhere, until lately there were no means of lifting water to the fire in the roof of a building, the only way was to bring the fire down with the roof and stop it from spreading by destroying the house.

The kindness of the Rev. W. Greenwood enables me to show the reproduction by photography of an old print which shows the firehook ready for action on a three-wheeled carriage, the pole of the gigantic hook resting on a reel at the top of a frame, which also carried buckets and other apparatus. It is interesting as explaining how the great hooks were worked in



village streets, where it would often be too narrow for horses, and difficult and dangerous for men. The frame formed the fulcrum of a lever which could lift, as well as haul the thatch from burning houses. Allowance must be made for the faulty perspective, otherwise the picture is very clear. Judging from the height of the men employed on the machine, the firehooks with the poles are at least twice the size and length of the firehooks as we know them. This picture is called "the thatch-hook," and is dated 1620, and shows that the hooks could take

a good hold of the thatch, but would need rings to deal with a tiled roof. It may be that the rings in the more recent buildings were put in by the builders from custom, and were even considered to be ornamental, and remain there as useless vestigial appendages to remind us of the past.

A philosopher, Goethe, I think, has said, that to venture an opinion is like moving a piece at chess; it may be taken, but it makes a beginning or is a part of the game. My opinion as to the hooks and rings may be like a modest pawn and soon to be sacrificed; there is nevertheless the reward of the game if only the game be not too dull, and apart from their possible connexion with firehooks, the rings on old houses are curious and interesting details of the domestic architecture of old Cambridge.

THE SENATE HOUSE YARD AND EARLY CAMBRIDGE
STATIONERS¹.

BY J. W. CLARK, M.A., AND J. E. FOSTER, M.A.

¹ This paper will be published in a future volume of Proceedings.

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