



The Origin and Date of Chester Rows

BY E. W. COX

THE origin of the Rows in Chester appears to have arisen from the double purpose the city served as a seaport and as a great central market town in a rich agricultural and trading district; the area for these requirements, being restricted by its defensive walls and its plan, in such manner as to prevent the allotment of separate districts of the city for distinct trades. The two separate features of colonnades and cellars for the storage of merchandise, or for commercial and other trades, are to be found in many other mediæval English towns, but they are, with very few exceptions, found distinct, and not as in Chester together.

The system of colonnades is to be found in Nottingham and Newark, where they partly surround the market places. In Dartmouth and in Strickland Gate, Kendal, a few ancient houses show remains of what once was identical with the Rows of Chester, but which are now closed. Vaults and crypts similar to those of Chester are found in New Winchelsea, founded in the thirteenth century; and many of very fine work existed under the merchants' houses in London. If colonnades (which were used as open-air shops and stalls) were required in conjunction with cellars for storage, the Row becomes a structural necessity. The use of the colonnade for the

display and sale of goods would be practically impossible with the passage of goods to and fro across them; and *vice-versa* the shops would obstruct the entrance to cellars on the same level. A modern version of Rows borders the Liverpool Docks, and once extended much further than at present. The Goree Piazzas represent the Row with its shops; the vaults below them are worked from the street, the only difference consisting in the fact that the strongly built stores above enable goods to be hoisted and lowered by cranes, while the slighter timber structures of Chester necessitated the working of the merchandise by manual labour on a level only so much below the street as to permit the goods to be rolled in and out. To this we must add that only four main streets were available within the safely defended limits of the City Walls for the storage of valuable merchandise. Not only were large spaces occupied by St. Werburgh's and the Friaries, but there is reason to think that the western wall was not extended to its present position before 1322 or thereabouts; the old limit being the line of Nicholas Street. Reasons for this I have given elsewhere, that the existence of the walls and defences indirectly originated the Rows. It will be seen that in the non-commercial portions of the city, the Rows, as in Northgate Street and Eastgate Street southward, and outside in Foregate Street, become colonnades on the street level.

The variation in the level of the floors of the Rows shows that they were in many cases separately constructed, but mutual convenience ultimately caused most of them to be made continuous by the accommodation of the levels. The encroachments on the street, made by the Rows, is apparent in many ways. The original front of the older crypts stands back from the present

street lines; doubtless the external steps were first enclosed and the house-fronts brought forward. In all cases the motive of the extension appears to be the enlargement of the stall-boards, not of the Row itself. At the top of Bridge Street, on the north side, the bressumer beams of the original house-fronts and their posts and piers remain, and beyond these are similar piers carrying the later fronts over the extended stall-boards—some of these, recently destroyed, showed two extensions. At the foot of the same street, the Row once existing is absorbed in the house, while evidences of the old Row exist inside. Encroachments of this kind are not unprecedented in mediæval towns. In Edinburgh, when the Borough Muir was denuded of its woods in the sixteenth century, any house owner, who was willing to build a timber front to his house, was permitted to encroach seven feet upon the street. In Bridge Street, below Commonhall Lane, and in Eastgate Street, near the Cross, are found very small shops on the outer side of the Row, showing how the stall-boards were enclosed first with rails, then with partitions, and so absorbed into the houses; while the Row in Eastgate joining Northgate the houses, which some years ago were timber buildings of Elizabethan date, have so completely occupied the frontage of the Row that it becomes a mere narrow lane behind them.

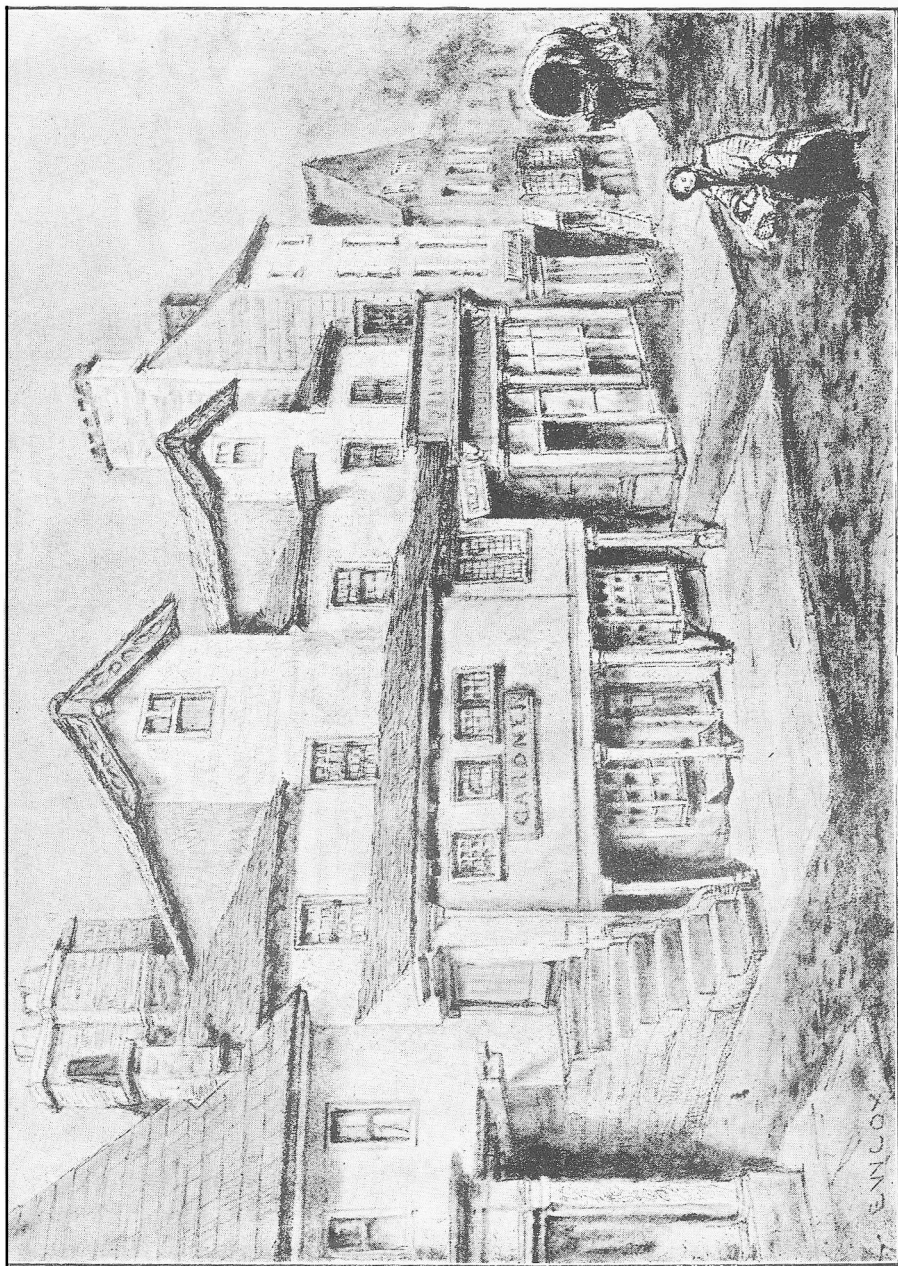
Turning now to the earliest structural traces of the Rows, I think that on the east side of Northgate Street can be dated back to about 1320 to 1330. The ancient hall of St. Nicholas' Parsonage (lately destroyed), behind Messrs. Walker & Knight's premises, was built on the level of the Row, not of the street. There were traces of other buildings in front of it, beneath which had been a cellar, and the floors over had been on the level of the

Row; but what showed most clearly that the mansion was built with a Row, was that the entrance doors to the house were on that level. The original stone plinth remaining to part of the hall showed that it had not, as was alleged, been a reconstruction, and this was on the Row level.

The next building giving evidence that these features are of early date is found in the house at the corner of Bridge Street and White Friars, within which and in the adjoining premises are arches of the late fifteenth century, probably forming part of the entrance gate and hospitium of White Friars. In this house on the Row level are to be seen a doorway with painted arch and a window, both now within the first-floor room. The window proves that this was an external wall, and the door that it opened to the Row, as it stands flush with the window and is inaccessible from the street. The arches crossing the Row at the former mansion of the Booths in Watergate Street are of sixteenth century date, and the termination of the stone walls through which they pass, and beyond which the later buildings project into the street, are good instances of the encroachment upon the street space as well as of the existence of the Row during the before-named century.

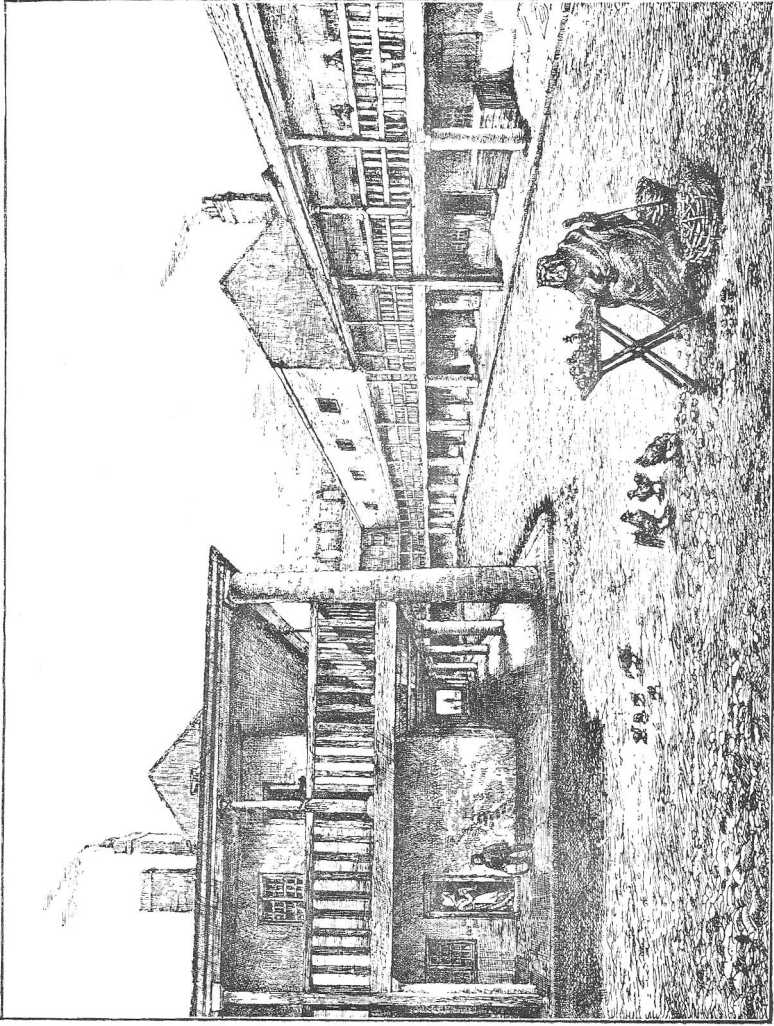
A KENDAL ROW.

The first floor above the wooden colonnade contains the Row. This was originally open in the front, the small windows now inserted being later additions; I have seen it open during repairs made many years ago. On the left of the drawing a projecting beam shows where the Row was continued; the more modern front of the house has been set back. On the right, part of the Row has been nearly effaced by a shop-front being inserted. The next house to the right, with the cellars below the



Kenilworth

JOHN



Engraving by J. M. Stephens, N.Y.

Richmond Row, Liverpool.

bay windows, and the door in the side up a high flight of steps, seems at one time to have been adapted for a Row. There are, or were in 1842, many other houses in Kendal with the Row on the ground-floor. The streets of Kendal strongly resemble the Scotch fashion, which also prevails in Chester. Side streets leading off the main lines are very few and small; their substitutes being the narrow passages or wynds entering side courts, thus admitting of continuous Rows.

ROWS IN LIVERPOOL,—IN RICHMOND ROW AND
FOX STREET.

These are double-galleried Rows, and were built in 1785 as shops, chiefly for the sale of cloth. At one end of the street (on both sides) the second or upper storey is built over the Rows as at Chester; at the other end there are the double Rows only, carried by pillars of brick with oak pillars set midway between each pair. These Rows appear to be imitated from Chester. There were formerly other Rows in Liverpool, but the entire want of trustworthy drawings and references as to the character of the buildings before the siege (in which so many were destroyed) prevents our ascertaining whether they were galleried. Preeson's Row, near the Castle, was possibly so; it adjoined the market, and part of the market was accommodated in arcades on the north and south sides of St. George's Church. Several other old streets have the name of "Rows" indicating trades, as Coopers' Row, Shoemakers' Row; and the original plan of the line of streets adjoining the docks was designed with arcades on the ground-floor, cellars below and stores above. Many of these are now destroyed; some were never finished; a few remain near George's Dock.