

ARCHITECTURAL NOTES ON STAPLE INN, HOLBORN.

BY

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THE Elizabethan and later work in Staple Inn is of the highest architectural and antiquarian value. Even when London abounded in fine specimens of half-timber work, the long front to Holborn was a noteworthy piece of building; but now, when we can count surviving examples of this charming method of construction "within the four-mile radius" practically on the fingers of both hands, it has become one of London's "lions." The exact date of this frontage is 1586.

I remember the Holborn front in its unrestored state, and have sketches of it made in 1880, when the half-timber construction was masked by a thick coating of drab-coloured rough-cast, and most of the original casements had been replaced by sash-windows. The two gables on the west, or spectator's right, had been bridged across with lath and plaster, and any of the old oak still showing was concealed by paint.

One of the subtle charms of an old street frontage with a row of gables is that the frontage line is rarely straight, but on a more or less irregular curve, producing a delightful play of light and shadow in the many facets of the gables. This was, and is, the case with the Holborn front of Staple Inn; and now that the disfiguring rough-cast and paint have gone, and the ancient timber construction of walls, gables, and windows stands revealed, this charm of the many-gabled and many-faceted front compels the attention and wins the whole-hearted admiration of the "man in the street," as well as the connoisseur. The able and faithful

restoration carried out by the Prudential Assurance Company, under the late Mr. Alfred Waterhouse, R.A., is amply justified, and the time that has elapsed only increases one's satisfaction.

There are seven gables breaking out of the long tiled roof in the front to Holborn, and this front is of four storeys, the three upper projecting slightly over those below. A moulded oak breast-summer carries these projections, and this is supported here and there by carved oak brackets, some of them the original. The timbers of the walling are somewhat closely spaced, and are all vertical, save that a wide sill-piece is carried through at the level of the window-sills. The design of the five eastward gables and the bays to which they belong is more or less uniform. Each bay has a projecting window of four or five lights in carved brackets, but the third bay from the east, over the archway to the courtyard, has a larger projecting window standing out boldly over the archway, with cornices breaking out from those of the main front. All these windows are transomed, and are filled with leaded glazing in oblong frames. In the two western bays on the extreme right the fenestration is differently treated on all three floors, partly on account of the floor-levels being different, there being four floors besides the ground storey, instead of three. This variation in the levels produces a break in the horizontal lines of cornices and windows, and this, with the boldly bracketed oriel windows on the second floor, makes the most picturesque feature in the whole front. In these overhanging oriels much of the framework, the windows, and the brackets with carved foliage and grotesque heads is original sixteenth-century work, very well preserved. The chimney-stacks appear to be comparatively modern, though of good design.

The circular archway to the courtyard, within which is the porter's lodge, is of stone, on square piers, with characteristic arch enrichments of convex flutings, and the piers have moulded impost and plinths, and the remains of a

tapering pilaster, with Ionic capitals, on the face. The double gates, of massive panelled work, with a jib door, are also original, hung on the ancient hinges. There is a good pen-drawing of this front, before its restoration, in the "Building News" for April 20th, 1883.

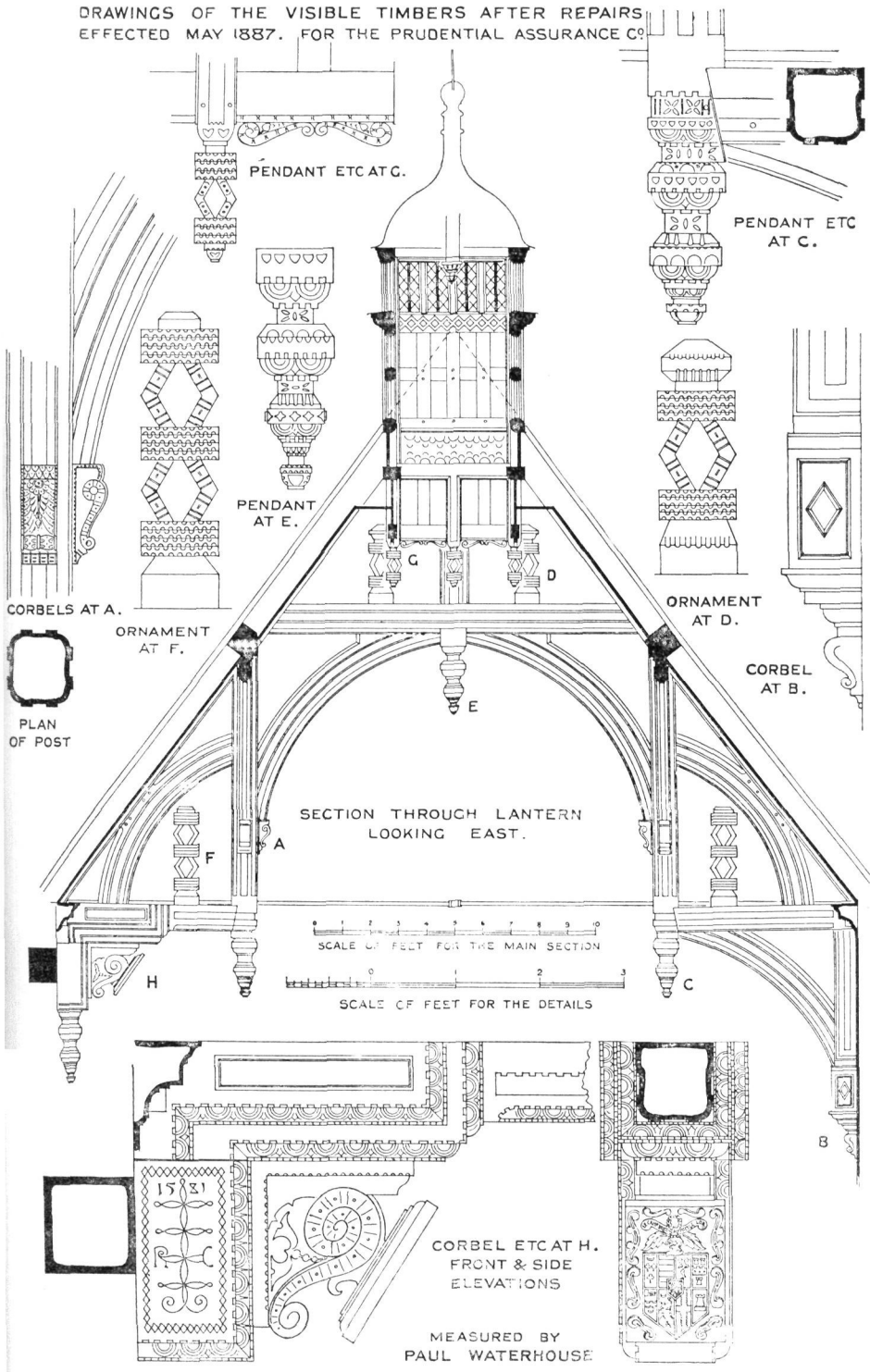
The southern front of the street block, within the courtyard, is of eighteenth-century brickwork, and has little interest; some of the ground-floor doors and windows, dressed up in stucco, may represent older work.

The hall of the Inn, on the site of one dating from the fourteenth century, occupying part of the southern side of the courtyard, is built of early eighteenth-century brickwork, and the frontages of the other blocks are all of various dates in the eighteenth century, from 1729 downwards. This date, 1729, appears on a rainwater-head of the eastern block of buildings, and is repeated on a doorway: "Reædificata sumptibus hujus Hospitii. 1729. Roberto Jenkyn, Gen. Pr."

The hall is, however, of much older date than the brick walls, which quite possibly are only an eighteenth-century casing or refacing. Its date is 1581—five years earlier than the timbered building to the street. The mullioned and transomed windows appear to be of stone, or stucco, painted, and are probably of 1581. In the north wall facing the courtyard the entrance is towards the western end, and eastward is a four-light window with two tiers of lights, beyond which again is a projecting bay of six lights in three tiers. This bay window, from the awkward arrangement of the roof truss inside, virtually suspended in the air, is most probably of later date—perhaps 1655, the date on a rainwater head, adjoining on the E. side. The south wall has two large three-light windows, and dividing the bays are brick and stone buttresses, answering to the roof principals. The *daïs* was at the east end, where the sixteenth-century paneling remains. It appears to have been largely renewed on the north and south walls, but the panelled support of the

STAPLE INN. HOLBORN. ROOF OF THE HALL.

DRAWINGS OF THE VISIBLE TIMBERS AFTER REPAIRS EFFECTED MAY 1887. FOR THE PRUDENTIAL ASSURANCE CO



PENDANT ETC AT G.

PENDANT ETC AT C.

PENDANT AT E.

ORNAMENT AT D.

CORBELS AT A.

ORNAMENT AT F.

CORBEL AT B.

PLAN OF POST

SECTION THROUGH LANTERN LOOKING EAST.

SCALE OF FEET FOR THE MAIN SECTION

SCALE OF FEET FOR THE DETAILS

CORBEL ETC AT H. FRONT & SIDE ELEVATIONS

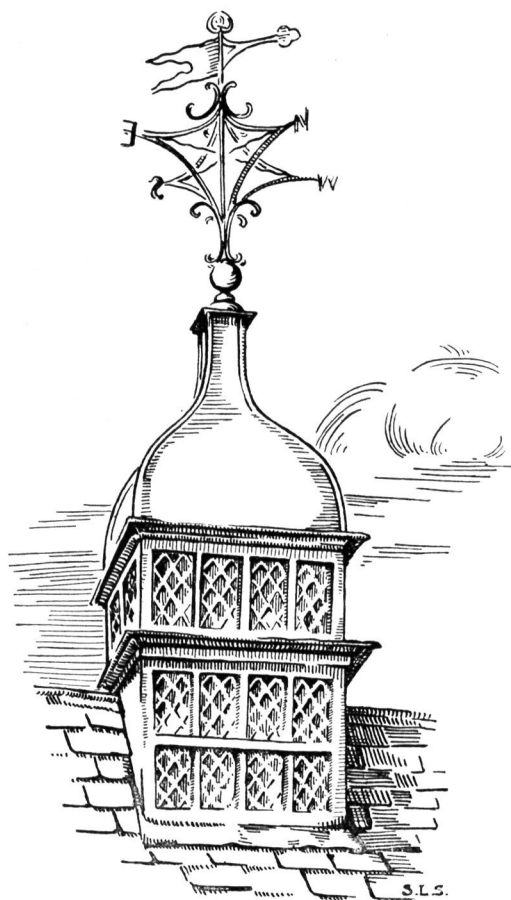
MEASURED BY PAUL WATERHOUSE

wall seat that runs continuously along these walls is largely original. From the centre of the roof rises a pretty little louvre, with three tiers of glazed lights and a leaded cupola, bearing a weather-vane.

There are four bays in the fine Elizabethan roof of modified hammer-beam construction. It is on one of the oak corbels that the date 1581 is carved. The two western bays measure 14 ft. 4 in., centre to centre; the eastern, 12 ft. 8 in. The brick walls are 2 ft. 4½ in. thick. There are doorways in the western bay in the north and south walls. That on the south side, both doorway and door, is a curiously elaborate composition in Georgian Gothic, with the date 1753, the head being of trefoiled form, with label of carved finial, flanked by shafts and pinnacles, and in the head is a quatrefoil bearing the initials TPL. There is no more elaborate doorway of its style and period in London, and it is really a pretty bit of work, with something of the old Gothic spirit.

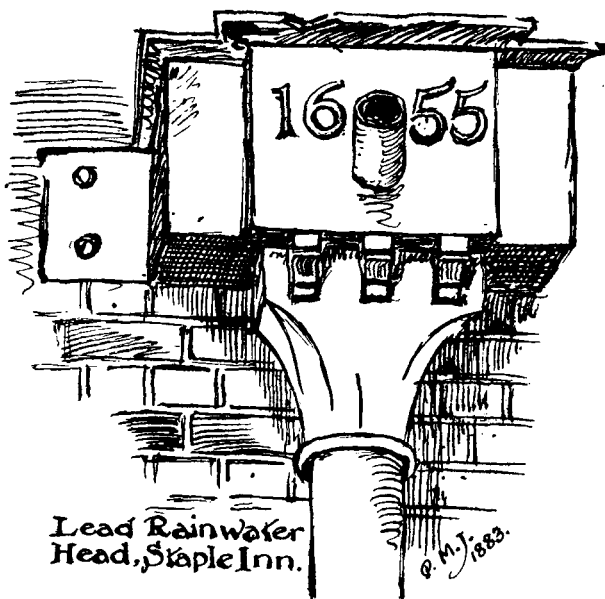
In the western bay is the screen of 1581, supporting a gallery with panelled front, in which is the curious old clock with a wooden case. This screen is elaborately carved with pilasters boxing in the posts, having Ionic capitals and pedestal bases on either side of the two screen doorways. These were originally open, and the present doors are modern. The doorways have circular heads, with scalloped soffit and egg and tongue moulding. In the spandrels are lions' heads set in circles, and the arches have key consoles carved with gruesome men's heads with moustaches of foliage.

The little glazed lantern, with its prettily disposed windows, is as charming a feature from inside as it is from the outside. The roof out of which it rises is a very elaborate and rich piece of Elizabethan carpentry, partly reconstructed or altered in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. It is of the hammer-beam form; only, while the main beams are Gothic, all the detail is of the debased classical forms favoured by the Elizabethan architects. Thus we have



arched bracket pieces from the main collar to the vertical post that stands in the hammer-beam and helps to form a cantilever. These are quite Gothic in feeling; so also are the pairs of curved braces that form a pointed arch in each bay longitudinally. The roof, at present slated, is of fairly steep section, finishing, not with a dripping eaves, but with a gutter behind a parapet. One of the lead rainwater pipes on its northern side is of peculiar interest, as dating eleven

years before the Great Fire of London. It is perhaps only second in date to those of St. Katherine Cree, Leadenhall Street. The head has a central box, with wing-pieces and large ears. The square box, of large size, has a storm-spout, and beneath are three prettily moulded corbels. The date is in raised letters on the central body, 1655. Probably it marks a general repair. The square of the central box is carried down to the circular pipe by a sort of capital.



Lead Rainwater
Head, Staple Inn.

It would appear that, in this Cromwellian period perhaps, the roof was partially reconstructed, for at the junction of the principals with the wall the arched braces are cut off, and a square cushion-block is inserted which does not fit them, while below is a corbel with a moulded abacus of later character. The present dentil cornice appears to be modern. Some of the glass in the windows, including the heraldic coats, dates back to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Beneath the hall is a basement, or cellars, of the same area, divided longitudinally by a sleeper wall to carry the joists of the floor. Some of the brickwork here seems to be older than that of the walls of the hall. The stone and flint cobble pavement of the courtyard is very old—perhaps older than the present buildings.

One word more about the Elizabethan woodwork inside the hall. There is a strong resemblance between the screen at the west end and that of the hall of Cuckfield Park, Sussex—a fine piece of carved oak work, dated 1581. This may be a chance resemblance, but the exact coincidence in date and the probability that both were executed in London suggest that the same workmen may have carried out both screens. It is possible that Henry Bowyer, the rebuilder of Cuckfield Park, may have had some connection with Staple Inn.

NOTE.—For the use of the blocks of the roof and the louvre (pp. 155-7) we are indebted to the courtesy of Mr. Elijah Williams, F.R.G.S., in whose book on Staple Inn they were used.—EDITOR.