

Numbers 7 and 9 West Street, Dunstable

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INTRODUCTION

During the last six years the writer has investigated the majority of the buildings in Dunstable which contain surviving elements of medieval and post medieval timber framing. Behind many of the eighteenth and nineteenth century planted facades evidence of previously unrecognised fifteenth and sixteenth century timber-framed buildings has been discovered. The study of this fast disappearing evidence is vitally important if the late medieval town plan is to be understood in some detail. A great deal of the information is fragmentary and in many instances neither the local authorities or the owners were aware of the existence of early timber framing within certain properties. It is hoped that a general picture of the type of buildings, their style and carpentry will be formulated from this series of sometimes fragmentary pieces of evidence each of which, viewed in isolation, appear to be of little value historically.

The survey of the town is still in progress and a later paper in a future issue of the *Bedfordshire Archaeological Journal* will summarise the evidence for the majority of the main buildings investigated. This paper describes in detail the total survey made of the late medieval shop and hall that stood at the eastern end of West Street and was demolished to make way for the new shopping centre.

THE TOWN PLAN

Medieval Dunstable grew up around the junction of two long-established and historic highways; the Roman Watling Street running north-south and the Prehistoric Icknield Way running east-west. The Charter of Henry I and the establishment of both a Dominican Friary and an Augustinian Priory encouraged the prosperous growth of the market town. The town plan was restricted to a tight cruciform centred on the crossroads until the nineteenth century. An eighteenth century plan shows how small the town was even at this date, prior to the rapid expansion over the next hundred years accelerated by the arrival of the railway in Dunstable.

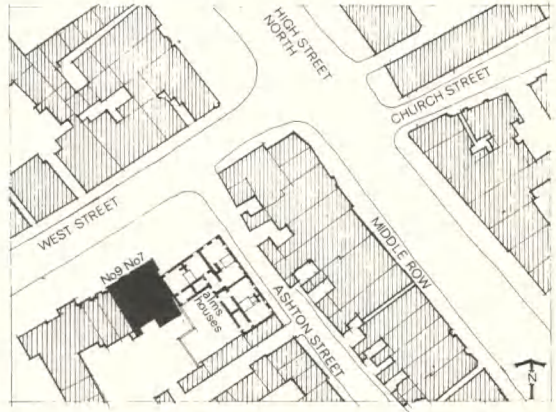


Fig 1 Plan of Dunstable cross roads showing position of nos 7 and 9 West Street.

The growth and location of the buildings in medieval Dunstable was governed by the road pattern and also the location of the two monastic houses.

The market was located on the Watling Street south of the crossroads. There grew up in this wide section of the road, a group of shops and houses called "Middle Row". These had access to their east side onto the Watling Street and to their west onto a lane that is now known as Ashton Street. This intrusion into the Watling Street also occurred for a short distance north of the crossroads.

The Augustinian Priory extended over a wide area of the south-east quadrant of the town centre. Certain of the Priory buildings fronted onto the Watling Street where it is known that was a gate house. Parts of the Priory survive in what is now the Priory Church of St Peter's.

Across the Watling Street in the south-west quadrant of the town centre the Dominican Canons erected their Priory. This was totally destroyed following the Dissolution. A considerable portion of the plan was excavated in the 1960's and 1970's.

Running out from the crossroads along all of

the road frontages the medieval buildings infilled between the boundaries of the two priories to form the characteristic Dunstable cruciform town plan with the Middle Row buildings forming a central feature alongside the market.

NUMBERS 7 AND 9 WEST STREET

The building of a shopping centre on the south side of West Street close to the town centre necessitated the demolition of a range of multi-period buildings. Number 7 West Street was known to be of timber-framed and jettied construction and the South Bedfordshire District Council donated a sum of money to allow this building to be carefully dismantled and transported to the Chiltern Open Air Museum for re-erection in its original form as a "Tudor" shop with hall to the rear. The adjacent building, Number 9, from both internal and external examination appeared, before demolition to be a three-storey Edwardian house. During demolition many timbers of a sixteenth-century jettied timber-framed building were found embedded in the later walls. There was enough evidence to establish the size and general construction of this building.

NUMBER 7

Number 7 was, prior to demolition, a barber's shop fronting onto West Street. To the east were the foundations of the demolished eighteenth-century Ashton Alms Houses.

Enough of the structure remained for a total analysis to be made and its original form as a "Tudor" shop and hall to be established. The only exception to this is the south end of the hall which appears to have been rebuilt.

Although the ground floor of the front elevation had been cut away there was enough evidence from the carpentry of the mid-plate to establish the construction of the shop front in principle.

Originally the building comprised a ground floor shop fronting the road with a jettied room over and a hall to the rear (fig 2). The front elevation of the building can be reconstructed in some detail. At the upper level of this elevation the studs survive, cut away in part by a modern window.

Examination of the underside of the tie beam showed that there was originally a window in the centre of the elevation and that it had two mullions. On this elevation at first floor level

there was apparently only one tension brace. This was on the inner face of the studs between the north west upper corner post and bressummer. Neither the north east corner post nor the eastern half of the bressummer had mortices for a tension brace. The reason for only one tension brace may be because of the construction form of the western side of the front bay of the building, discussed later. None of the studs survived at the ground floor level of this front elevation. Fortunately the mid-plate survived intact and along the underside were the slots for door and window spandrels and the mortices for door and window posts. There were also hollow mouldings running across the positions of the door and window heads. All of these details are shown in figure 2 together with a reconstruction of the door and window detail. The gable was infilled with close studding, all of which survived. A conjectural reconstruction of the front elevation is shown in figure 3.

The side walls (east and west) of both shop and hall, were infilled with widely spaced studs (fig 2) with the exception of the west wall of the shop bay. Examination of the western end girth showed that it was free from mortices on both top and underside. This must indicate that this portion of the western wall was not infilled and the wall of an existing building next door (no 9) was used as a party wall. The unstiffened nature of this section of the west wall may account for the addition of the single tension brace at the front of the upper storey. The owner of the shop presumably considered that the gain in floor area was worth the risk of omitting the stiffening infill the extra studs would have provided in the west wall. It was certainly not for access as the wall of the adjacent building was originally infilled with close studding at the lower level. Unless, that is, some of the studding of No 9 found missing during demolition had been removed when No 7 was constructed to allow access between the two buildings. The buildings were apparently under one ownership at a later period as discussed below. No evidence of windows was found in the east or west wall of the hall. Windows may have been in the south end of the hall, or in a further bay that may have existed and was demolished when the present south end of the building was rebuilt. The writer thinks it is more probable that the hall was unlit and was in effect a large smoke bay. The original roof was intact over both hall and shop and was of clasped

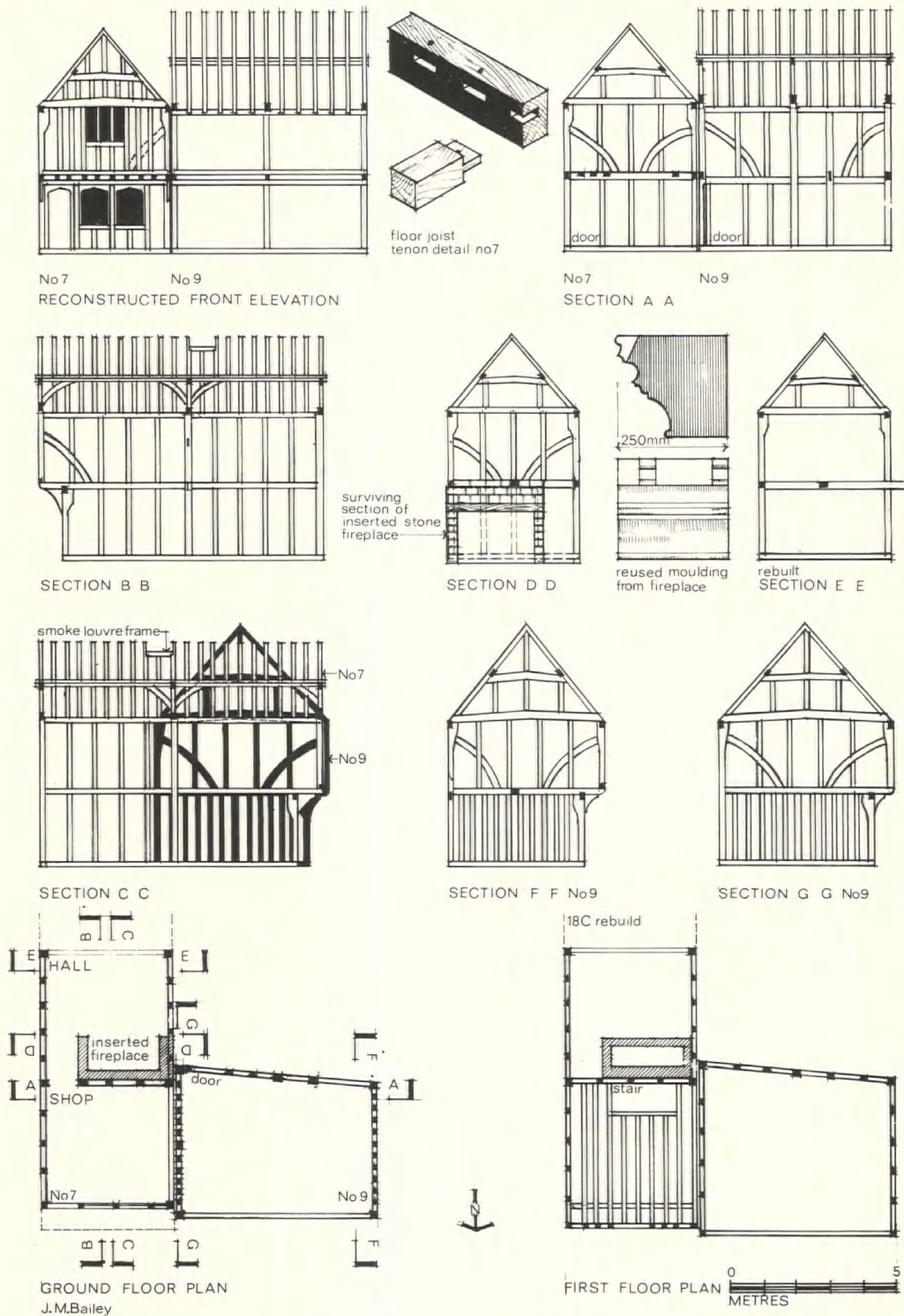


Fig 2 Plans and Sections of nos 7 and 9 West Street, Dunstable.

purlin construction. The principal rafters reduced above the purlins, and the collars tenon into the principal rafters. Wind braces between principal rafters and purlin occur in all situations except at the present south end of the hall. The absence of wind braces at the south end of the hall may indicate that the hall was originally longer. This is also discussed below. At the north end of the hall there was positive evidence of the louvre in the roof that was over the open fire (fig 3). The rafters over the hall were sooted and this was heavier towards the north end. The internal surfaces of the timbers in the room over the shop showed extensive traces of red ochre, particularly on the rafters.

A conjectural isometric reconstruction of the original building is shown in figure 3. Some time in the late sixteenth century a fireplace and chimney were added at the extreme north end of the hall and abutting to its west wall. The chimney was built from Totternhoe stone robbed from one of the two Priors, several of the stones were moulded. When the chimney was added the hall was floored over. To support the new floor joists a new primary joist was inserted across the apparent end of the hall (Section EE fig 2). This primary joist extended through the line of the west wall presumably relating to a structure to the south of No 9.

The western wall, for the length of the hall was not infilled and at the time of demolition the cut-off new primary joist was supported on the wall of No 9. It would seem that when the hall was floored the ground floor of No 7 was extended westward to the rear of No 9.

In the upper room above the shop there is evidence of a later door opening connecting No 7 to No 9. We can therefore assume that at the time of the flooring of the hall and the insertion of the new primary joist extending into No 9 that the two buildings were in common ownership. No 7 was extended or perhaps rebuilt to the south of this new primary joist line. The entire truss on this line (section EE), is rebuilt with reused timbers which do not seem to relate to what could have been the original end of the hall. It can be seen from section BB that there is no evidence of wind braces at the end of the hall. This would seem to indicate that either the hall was longer and that the purlins have been cut back or that they related to another structure at the rear.

If the buildings were originally related and No 7

built as an extension to No 9 then there could, from the beginning have been access from the hall to No 7.

In the nineteenth century the stone chimney stack was cut back to first floor level and a smaller brick chimney carried up on a different alignment. This was to allow access to either side of the chimney at first floor level.

The carpentry of No 7

The tie beams were secured to the top plates by bare faced lap dovetails with entrant shoulder.

The floor joists over the shop were jointed to binding joist by means of central tenon and morticed with pegs. There were two scarf joints used in the building. The purlins were jointed with a butted scarf with secret bridle and secured with one peg. The other joint used in the top plate and here a squint-butted scarf with secret bridle secured with two pegs was used. (fig 3).

The method of framing the end jetty is shown in figure 3.

NUMBER 9

Almost the entire original east end timber-framed wall of No 9 was found sandwiched between No 7 and the new brickwork of No 9. The relationship between No 7 and No 9 is shown in (fig 2 section CC). During the destruction of the early twentieth century brick three-storey building on the site of No 9 the following additional original timbers were found embedded in this brickwork:— rear top plate, rear mid-plate, west end girth complete.

These timbers gave the overall size of No 9 and the joints in the various timbers allowed us to reconstruct the general form of the building. The structure was a two storey continuous-jetty building fronting onto the street. The west end was some 40cm narrower than the eastern end.

The building was in two bays with an additional storey post in the rear wall of the western bay. There was a door in the rear wall adjacent to the south-east corner post. The complete east wall (fig 2 section GG) showed that the roof was of clasped purlin construction with the principal rafters the same width throughout their length.

The rear wall had widely spaced studs at both ground and first floor level with tension braces externally between storey posts and top of mid-plate (fig 2 section AA). East and west ends were constructed in a similar manner with close studding below girths and widely spaced studs

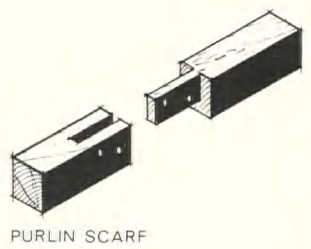
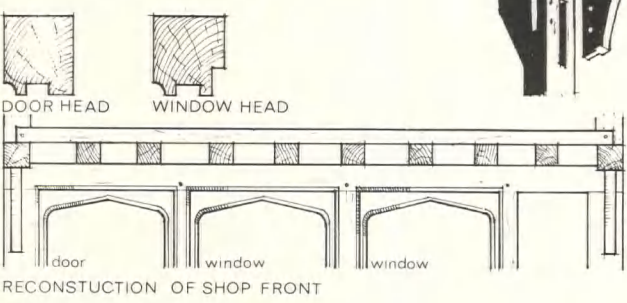
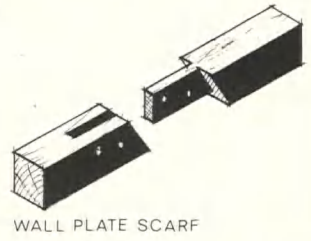
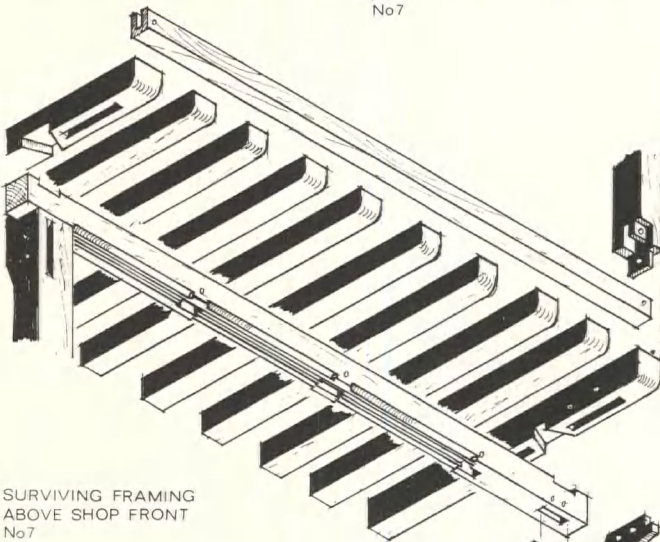
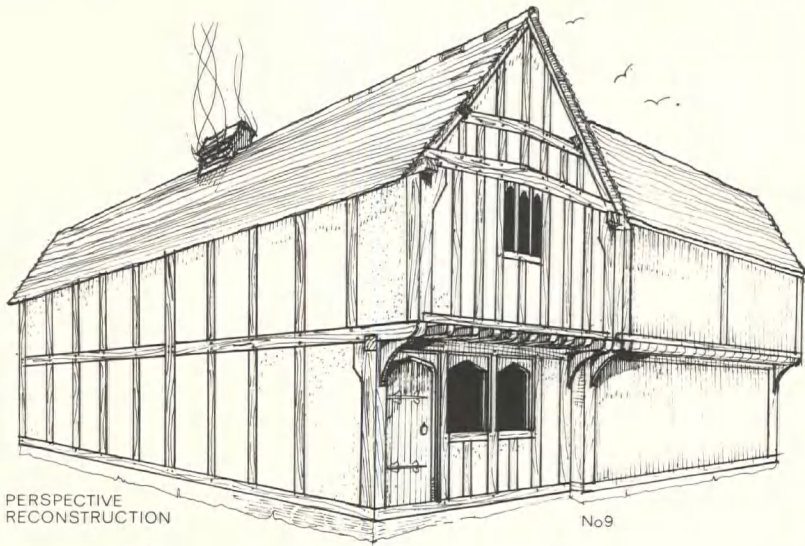


Fig 3 Nos 7 and 9 West Street, Dunstable: perspective reconstruction and framing details.

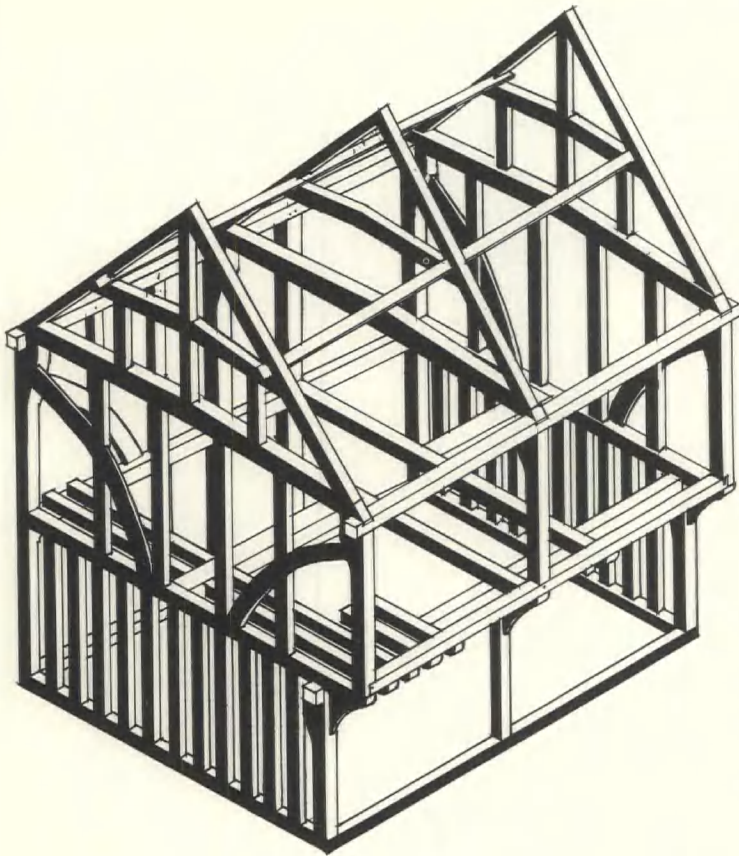


Fig 4 No 9 West Street, Dunstable: reconstructed isometric of frame.

above girths, and external tension braces at first floor level between corner posts and girth. A primary joist tenoned into the inner face of the end girths. There was a slight difference in construction between the east and west ends. At the east end the infill below the end girth consisted of closely spaced studs of equal size. At the west end, however, there was a larger post on the centre line of the ground floor level.

From the rafter notches on top of the rear top plate it was possible to reconstruct the whole roof on the drawings. Although there were two storey posts at the rear of the building only the one on the centre line related to a tie beam and truss. The secondary storey post had a mortice to receive a girth. Is it possible that this secondary girth only one metre from the one on centre

of the building was to form part of the structure for a smoke bay or smoke hood, or could it have formed the opening for a chimney stack? The chimney stack at Lancotbury House, Totternhoe, a continuous-jetty, sixteenth-century building, is set between two girths in this manner. The conjectural isometric reconstruction of No 9 is shown in figure 4.

It would seem logical to conclude that No 9 was built before No 7 as they share a common party wall built as part of No 9. The extension of No 9 east gable over the roof of No 7 in later work would also add weight to this conclusion.

Abutting to the east of No 9 were the foundations of the eighteenth century Ashton Almshouses. Following the demolition of No 9



Pl 1 The medieval shop at Ashwell, Hertfordshire, (now the village museum).
[Photograph: D.H. Kennett]

the surrounding area was briefly investigated by the Manshead Archaeological Society. Under the adjacent foundation wall of the Almshouses and slightly to the rear of No 9 a well was discovered. This had been sealed with eighteenth century material presumably at the time of the building of the almshouses. There was no evidence of the pre-eighteenth century buildings to the east of No 9 which may have related to No 9.

The carpentry of No 9

The surviving tie beam at the east end of the building was joined at the top plate with a lap dovetail. The joint halfway along the surviving rear top plate shows that the central tie beam was also jointed by a lap tailed dovetail.

The end girth is tied to the front mid-plate by a lap dovetail.

Infill panels were of two forms. The close studded sections where the panels are in the order of only 200mm had oak lath sprung horizontally into continuous vertical slots down the sides of the studs. More widely spaced panels were infilled with horizontal wattling woven across three or four vertical stakes.

CONCLUSION

The evidence for the use of No 7 as a shop is convincing and being built with a hall with open hearth it is probably of fifteenth century date. The shop elevation, if the reconstruction is correct, is of a form quite common, perhaps one of the best known parallels being at Lavenham, Suffolk; another example is at Ashwell, Hertfordshire, (plate 1). The Dunstable building's construction followed the common practice of close-studded decorative work on the front and wide panels on the hidden side elevations.

With absence of information to reconstruct the front elevation, a decision on the use of No 9 is not possible.

The use of such close studding at the ground floor of the side elevations would at first appear to be decorative. It is most unlikely, however, that this building would be isolated so close to the town centre and that views of this infill work could be seen by passers-by. Was the close infilling intended as an internal decoration? No 32-34 West Street which has a similar roof construction has unusually close studding work on an internal partition and end wall at first floor level. The use of both close and wide spaced studding on a single building is not uncommon in Bedfordshire.

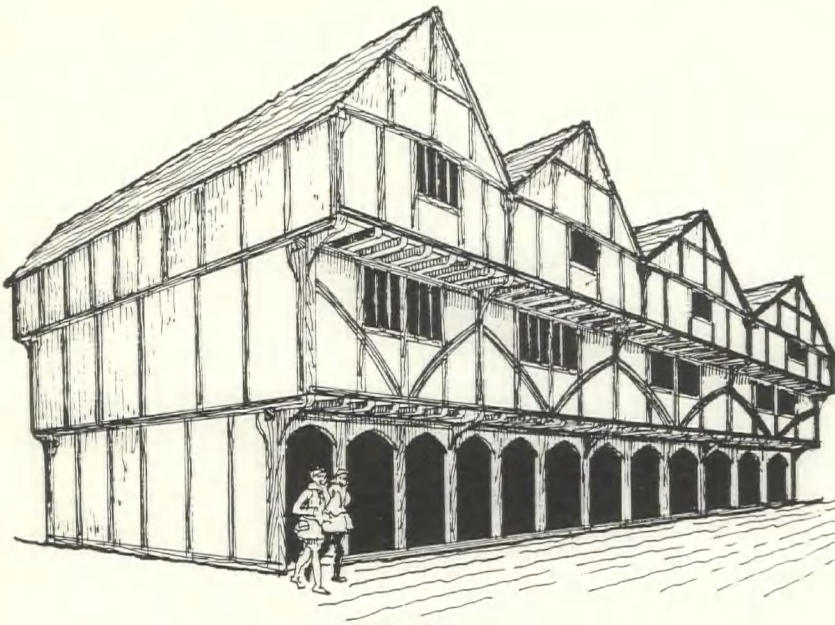


Fig 5 Reconstruction of the medieval shops in Middle Row, Dunstable.

APPENDIX

NUMBERS 26 to 32 MIDDLE ROW, DUNSTABLE

Building modernisation to several of the shops in Middle Row during 1979 gave an opportunity to investigate many of the surviving elements of timber framed buildings in detail. During these investigations enough surviving evidence was found to show that there stood near the southern end of Middle Row four pairs of back to back shops; a total of eight shops in all. These shops were at the ground floor of a three storied structure jettied at first and second floor level to both front and rear. Middle Row is a row of shops planted in the Watling Street south of the crossing with the Icknield Way at the centre of Dunstable. It is at the

site of the Medieval Market square and it is most probable that the medieval buildings on the site developed from temporary stalls. A section and reconstruction drawing of the shop at Number 30 Middle Row, Dunstable, appear as figures 40 and 39 respectively of J.M. Bailey, *Timber-Framed Buildings: a study of medieval timber buildings in Bedfordshire and adjoining counties* (Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire and Cambridgeshire Historic Building Research Group, 1979).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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