

The Late Medieval Origins of the "Town House" at Kempston Church End

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SUMMARY

Recent observation and survey has confirmed that the timber framed building known variously as the "Town House", or 1-4 Church End, Kempston, has late medieval origins. The entry in the Statutory List of Buildings of Special Architectural or Historic Interest incorrectly claims that it is a 17th century range of houses, but it is in fact a 15th or early 16th century building associated with the adjacent parish church of All Saints. Post-Reformation uses, notably the conversion to cottages, have altered the appearance of the building to the extent that its original purpose is no longer immediately apparent.

INTRODUCTION

Kempston Church End lies on the west bank of the River Great Ouse, 4 km south west of Bedford. Its focus is the medieval church of All Saints, which stands in a spacious churchyard next to the garden of the mid-19th century former vicarage. The southern boundary of the churchyard is defined by a long timber framed building known as the "Town House" from the 17th century, now converted to houses and called 1-4 Church End. In the 17th and 18th centuries the recorded uses of the building included a school, a wood-store, and a workshop (BLARS: PE 358, PE 466/2, and X 47). This report concentrates on the original function and construction of the building in the late medieval period, not the later uses and changes which have been discussed elsewhere (Carnell *et al* 1966).

External examination of the western gable shows that the structure was originally jettied on the north and south elevations. Modern renovations have exposed other parts of the timber frame, from which it has been possible to reconstruct much of the original internal plan, indicating that it was not a normal domestic building and that its two very large internal chambers or rooms probably performed communal functions.

DESCRIPTION OF THE SURVIVING MEDIÉVAL FRAME

Numerous post-medieval alterations have occurred, which have to be discounted in order to understand the original form and plan of the structure. These

include three chimney stacks, the brick underbuilding to the former jetties, an inserted second floor at eaves level, and a large number of internal walls and staircases. When these are ignored, the primary frame is found to consist largely of a roof and first floor structure containing eight bays (Fig 1). The majority of the ground floor frame was lost in 18th or 19th century alterations.

Each bay contained five common rafters, five studs, and five joists, except for bay 8 which was slightly narrower and contained four of each of these members. Bays 1-7 were open from first floor level to the roof ridge as one large chamber. These open bays had two sets of clasped purlins, with curved windbraces to the lower set. The upper collars were unsupported, but the lower collars were held up by queen posts. Each tie beam had arched braces rising from splayed and jowled wall posts. The tie beams had chamfers and stops, but the rest of the roof was plain.

The east and west gable walls were fully studded, with curved braces, and the cross-frame between bays 7 and 8 formed an original internal partition throughout its full height. Like the east gable, this frame had a form of king strut, rising from the upper collar to the ridge. A plain doorway provided access through this partition at first floor level, immediately south of the axial beam.

Although the ground floor frame has been almost wholly destroyed, enough evidence survives from the presence or absence of mortises to be able to piece together its basic plan and form. Bays 1-6 were open to form another long room or chamber, similar in arrangement on the first floor, and double ogee chamfers on all the beams advertised that this part of the building was highest in terms of status. Bays 7 and 8 were separated from this chamber, and divided from each other, by cross-walls. A further axial partition separated narrow bay 8 into two small units. Bay 7 had a double ogee chamfered axial beam, but its transverse beams were undecorated and formed parts of the internal cross-walls. An even lower status was afforded to bay 8, where the axial beam had only a plain chamfer.

The jetty construction survives best at the south east corner of the building, where it is encased in a

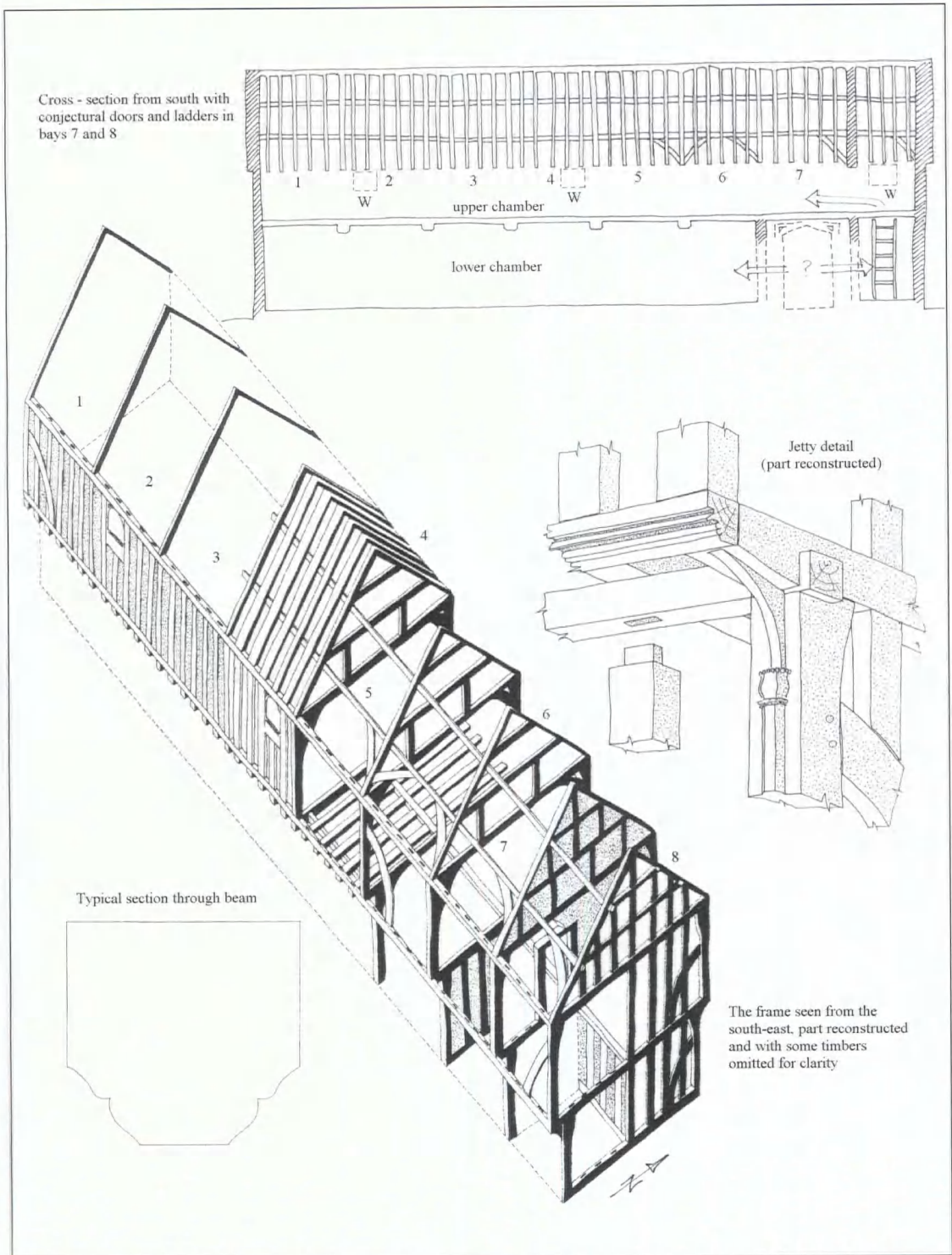


Figure 1 Timber Frame and Details at the "Town House", Kempston Church End

19th century outbuilding. It is of Type 2 as described by Harris, with the intermediate joists tenoned into the back face of the bressummer (Harris 1990). An eroded fragment of the moulding on the bressummer survives, and the corner post retains a semi-octagonal wooden shaft applied to the front face, with a capital shaped like a vase or barrel near the top (Fig 1).

Traces of three original window frames survive at first floor level, two of these being on the south elevation. They have four-centred arched heads and cusps in the spandrels. Only the cill remains of the third window, on the north side in bay 8. There is no certain evidence of any other windows, doors or stairs.

PRELIMINARY INTERPRETATION AND DATING

The clue to understanding this building lies in its two large internal spaces, a utilitarian upper chamber with a floor area of 131 square metres, and a high status lower chamber of some 96 square metres (Fig 1). It could easily have accommodated one hundred and fifty standing people at one time, or a hundred people seated at benches and tables, or twenty or thirty sleeping people. Alternatively, the upper floor could have been used for storing large quantities of materials. There is no evidence that the building was originally heated, or that it had a kitchen or any other domestic facilities. It is possible that there was once a detached kitchen of the type found in other southern counties (Martin 1997, Roberts 1997), but this is conjectural. Bay 8, which is narrower than the others, must not be misinterpreted as a smoke bay.

Insufficient evidence has survived to tell whether the original "front" of the building faced north or south, or whether both were accorded equal status. There may have been doors leading into the sides of the main chamber from the north or south, but it is also possible that there was access to this part of the building through the cross-wall from bay 7. If so, bay 7 may have acted as an entrance and circulation area, providing a choice of entry into the principal chamber at ground floor, or into the two smaller rooms in bay 8. Speculatively, a ladder or stair could have occupied the northern room in bay 8, landing on the spine beam to link with the door into the upper chamber, and lit by the window on the north wall (Fig 1). This appears to be the only possible location for a stair, but it is also the only part of the first floor that cannot be examined from above or below.

The relationship of the "Town House" to the parish church is relevant here, because bay 7 is

directly in line with the church porch. Nowadays, the path from the church goes through bay 8, but this must be a later alteration involving the removal of the original stud wall under the axial beam here. In fact, the path is on an alignment with bay 7, and appears to have been adjusted at the southern end to enter bay 8. There is no conclusive evidence of a western path to the church before the 19th century (BLARS: MA 18 and ME 25), so it seems possible that the building was planned with a dual function, partly as a southern boundary and entrance to the churchyard, and partly as a communal facility for the parish.

The date of construction is not known exactly, and has not been the subject of tree ring analysis, but some general guidelines can be established. For a start, the presence of jetties, king struts, queen posts, arched braces and curved windbraces implies a 15th or 16th century date (Mercer 1975). Details like the cusped windows, the barrel capitals on the jetty posts, and double ogee chamfers, are all broadly Perpendicular, and fall into a similar date range. Double ogee chamfers for example, are known from the late 14th century, but continue for at least another hundred years (Hislop 1997). King struts are also found in other Bedfordshire buildings of c.1500, for example Lancotbury in Totternhoe. Indirectly, a late medieval date is implied by the existence of the two-storey 15th century church porch (VCH 1912), that has an undeniable axial relationship with the "Town House".

While there are no direct parallels in Bedfordshire, the building may be compared with the Town Hall at Toddington, 2-6 High Street, Biggleswade, the Feoffee Almshouses at Ampthill, and the Moot Hall at Elstow, all of which are 15th or 16th century buildings near to churchyards, and some of which may have performed public functions. Taking all the evidence together, it seems that the "Town House" at Kempston was built between the late 14th and 16th centuries.

FURTHER EVIDENCE: GILDS AND FRATERNITIES

The high quality of the framing and the layout of the chambers are not consistent with the recorded functions of the building in the 17th century. However, the very name "Town House" suggests a history of parish use, and it has been noted that the building could have held a large, if perhaps selective, proportion of Kempston's population. The two chambers could have been used simultaneously, by two separate groups of people engaged in similar pursuits, or

the upper chamber could have been used as a dormitory or subsidiary area by those permitted to use the high status lower chamber. Such an arrangement is well suited to the activities of pre-reformation guilds, or fraternities. Although these were originally an urban phenomenon with a craft connection, hundreds of rural examples are known across the country. They were responsible for maintaining torches, lights or candles in the church, obtaining prayers and alms from all the members for the benefit of the souls of deceased brothers, arranging funerals and burials, and promoting charity and a sense of community. Guilds might have their own alderman and chaplain, and a light-warden to maintain a "stock" or "store" of wax for the lights, and they brewed their own ale, raising money by holding "drinkings", as well as providing dinners and feasts at appointed times of the year (Whiting 1983, Hutton 1987, Duffy 1992). Unfortunately, no such guild is recorded in Kempston, but it should be noted that the survival of documents relating to these organisations is haphazard. There are several Kempston wills from the period 1498-1528 naming typical gifts to the parish church, the high altar, the sepulchre light, bells, torches, trentals of masses, St Ann's light and the light of Our Lady of Pity (Cirket 1957, Bell 1966, McGregor 1979, Bell 1997), and it is possible that these intercessory transactions were at least partly controlled through a parish guild or fraternity that has not survived in the historical record.

Potential benefactors who may have contributed towards such a guild, or the construction of a guild-house, include John Baron Wenlock, and Thomas Rotherham, Bishop of Lincoln, who held land in Kempston during the periods 1461-1471 and 1471-1500 respectively (VCH 1912). This fits neatly into the middle of the time-range suggested above, but it need not necessarily point to a late 15th century date for the building itself. Guilds and fraternities were often supported within the parish at a fairly humble level, and capital may have been obtained by a more general subscription. From a structural viewpoint, the apparently idiosyncratic positioning of windows may indicate that each bay was separately funded by an individual or a group, according to their means, but there are of course other possible explanations for this.

After the suppression of guilds in 1538, their functions were discontinued or absorbed into other parish functions. No longer needed as "stores", or for parish entertainment and "drinking", buildings like the "Town House" would probably have become redundant or under-used for long periods in the 16th

century. This may account for the fact that this example came to be part of the Kempston Charity Estate, and it may explain why few, if any, subsequent alterations can be dated before c1700.

CONCLUSIONS

Taken together, the archival evidence, the design of the original building, and its topographical relationship with the church all point towards guild origins for the "Town House". It acted as a boundary and entrance to the churchyard, and as a place of communal activity at the physical and spiritual heart of the late medieval parish. A construction date in the late 15th or early 16th centuries seems probable, followed by a period of disuse after 1538. It is a remarkable example of what may once have been a relatively common building type, its lucky survival brought about by reuse as a workhouse and cottages.

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