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The Crown and Anchor Inn, St. Albans: An Interim Report

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THIS building is on the east side of Holywell Hill, immediately south of its meeting with Sopwell Lane, the old London Road. It is an important site. A building in this position would be well placed to command two of the principal streams of traffic through the town, but, surprisingly, despite its position there is no mention of this building in F. G. Kitton's article on the inns of St. Albans,¹ nor does it find a place in the Victoria County History. There is a very brief description, limited to the exterior, in the Hertfordshire volume of the Royal Commission on Historical Monuments.

There was indeed a "Crown Inn" on the east side of Holywell Hill and quite close to Sopwell Lane, too, but it is clearly described as between Sopwell Lane and Albert Street, that is north of the building under consideration.

Externally the "Crown and Anchor" reveals little of its true character. It is L-shaped in plan. The west range, that is on Holywell Hill, has closely-spaced timber framing in part of its upper storey, which is authentic though restored, but on the ground floor at the north-west corner one sees only nondescript brewer's modern and the rest of the façade is rendered. The one significant feature is a carriageway which is near the north end of the range.

The Sopwell Lane range has a rendered upper storey and a modern brick-built wall on the ground floor with a small carriage-opening about half-way along. The fenestration of both ranges is with one exception relatively modern, the exception being a window on the ground floor in Sopwell Lane which has the remains of a sixteenth-century frame. But this window, the jettying of the upper storey and the carriageways, are the only positive clues to the building's original character among much that has been altered and more that has been disguised.

¹ *St. Albans and Herts. Arch. Soc. Trans., New Series, Vol. 1, 1898-1903.*



PLATE I. THE SOPWELL LANE RANGE FROM THE EAST



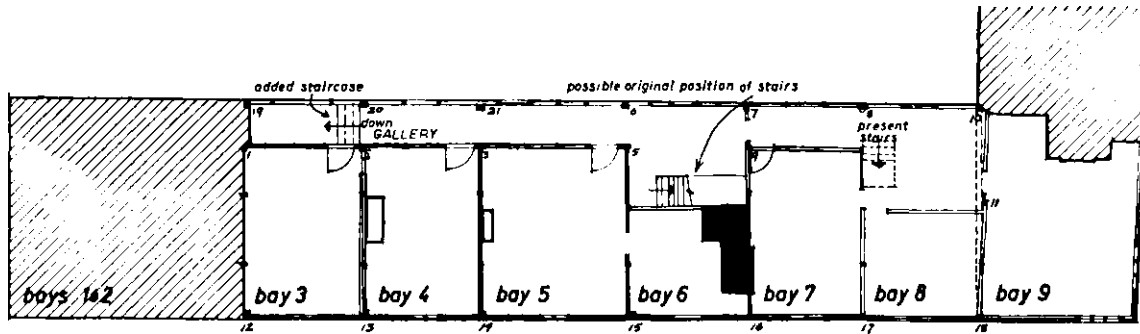
PLATE 2. PART OF THE FIRST-FLOOR GALLERY, SHOWING ONE OF THE PRINCIPAL POSTS.

Internally the scene is very different. There survives virtually complete one range of a timber-framed galleried inn of sixteenth-century date, probably of the second quarter of the sixteenth century, eight bays in length and approximately 20 ft. wide. The ninth bay is strictly part of the Holywell range which will be described later. The following is a description of the Sopwell range which contains the principal features of interest.

It is two-storeyed, originally timber-framed throughout but subsequently repaired and altered in brick. Though a number of the intermediate posts are missing the principals survive and are numbered on the plan (Fig. 1). The roof has queen-post trusses and curved wind-braces from the principal rafters to the purlins; the upper tie beam which is cambered is braced from the principals and so is the tie at first-floor level (Fig. 2). The upper storey is jettied on both sides, the gallery on the south overhanging the lower storey by approximately 4 ft. and resting on large curved brackets. The timbers are plain and of good scantling and the framing is sturdy and compact. The intermediates are generally widely spaced.

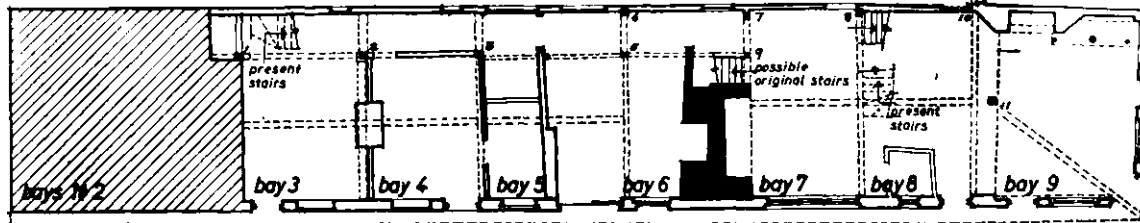
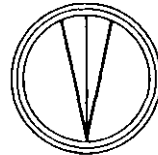
There is, as the plan shows, one original chimney stack in this range which has on the ground floor, facing west, a large stone fireplace with deeply moulded head and jambs (Fig. 3). It is in the form of a very wide four-centred arch and there is low-relief flower and foliage carving in the spandrels of the arch. It serves a room occupying bays 7 and 8. In this room are the remains of the original, multi-light window in the north wall and the ceiling here has moulded, intersecting beams which are of good quality and are virtually complete although parts are hidden by intrusive partitions. The fireplace has survived less well and parts of the jambs have been destroyed but sufficient remains to indicate that this room was one of the principal chambers in the building and the most important in this range.

East of this room is a carriageway but evidence suggests that this is not an original feature. No doubt it was formed when it was found useful to have direct access to the courtyard from Sopwell Lane, supplementing the larger carriageway from Holywell Hill.

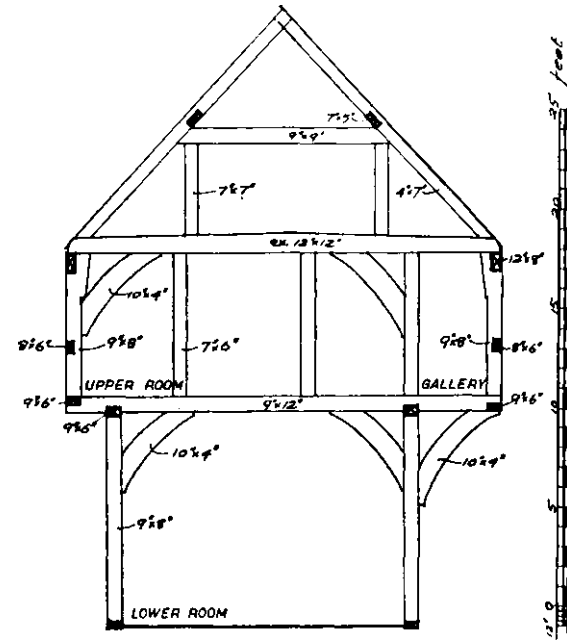


FIRST FLOOR PLAN

- ORIGINAL PARTITIONING
- - - SUBSEQUENT PARTITIONING
- w- ORIGINAL TIMBER FRAME WALL
- - - SUBSEQUENT BRICK WALL
- ORIGINAL BRICK WALL
- m\$ PRINCIPAL FRAME MEMBERS
- - - BEAMS
- ▨ UNSURVEYED



SOPWELL LANE
GROUND FLOOR PLAN



SECTION SHEWING FRAME CONSTRUCTION
BRICK WALLS, TILING & TIMBER SUB-FRAME OMITTED

£

CROWN and ANCHOR PUBLIC HOUSE
Sopwell Lane, St. Albans.

Dtrk Pool. <1".

W

FIG. 1

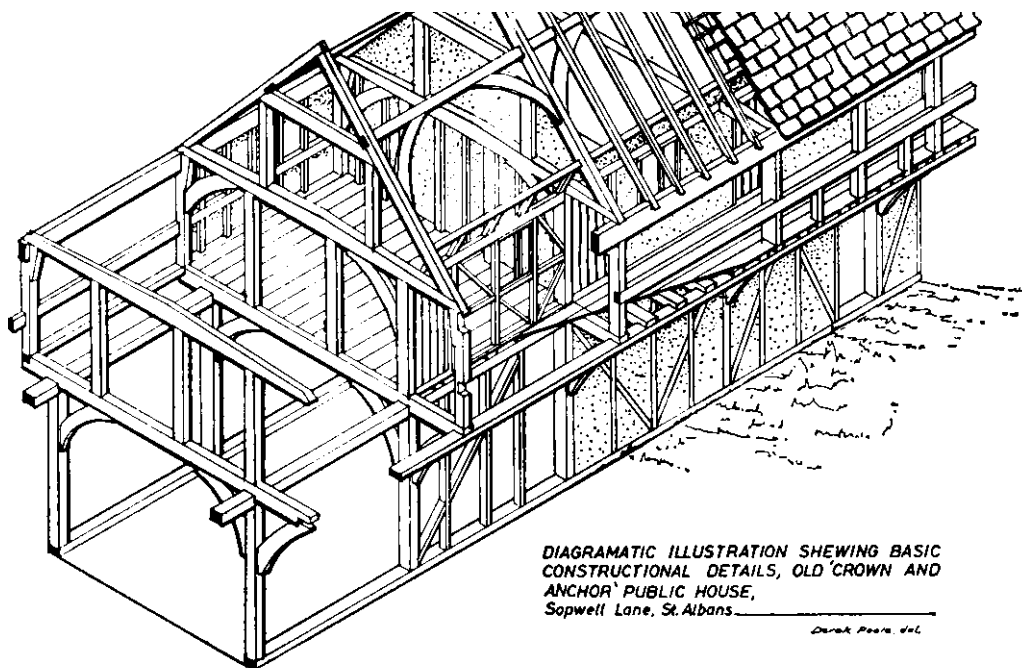


FIG. 2

East again of the carriageway there has been considerable alteration (bays 1 to 5) and not a great deal of evidence survives, but it is suggested that this part of the building was used principally for storage.

On the upper floor the most significant feature is the gallery on the inner, that is south, side. Its projection is at present largely hidden from view by a brick wall built in the same plane as the outer wall of the gallery, but it is clearly shown on a drawing of a section through the building (Fig. 1).

The gallery gives access to a series of lodgings on the upper floor which are remarkably uniform in their treatment though slightly different in size (bays 3, 4, and 5). Each lodging has a small two-light window looking on to the gallery, each has a window in the outer wall (north) and each has a doorway from the gallery in exactly the same position. Much of the sixteenth-century detail survives, including the

mullions of the gallery windows, and there is clear evidence of the arched heads of the doorways. There are no original fireplaces and there is no provision for any. Bays 1 and 2 could not be examined but very probably there were two further lodgings in these bays making five in all.

The outer wall of the gallery was originally open in its upper stage having one, and occasionally two, chamfered intermediate posts between the principals. The lower half is framed and panelled.

At the western end of the upper floor there was probably one room occupying bays 7 and 8, equivalent to the room immediately below, but the evidence is at present inconclusive. The principals and tie beams here are plain chamfered; the chimney-piece is modern.

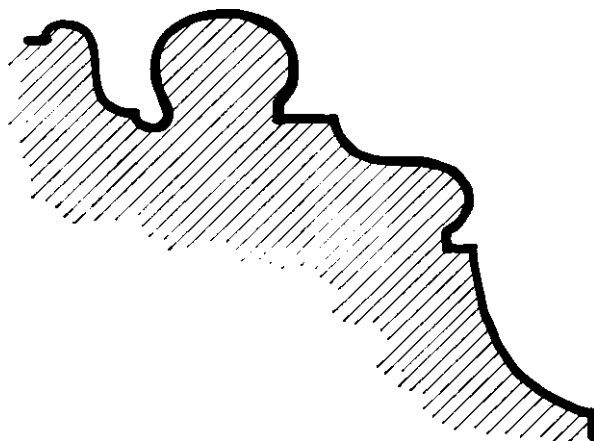


Fig. 3

Only part of the Holywell Hill range has been inspected and measured and therefore conclusions about it must be tentative. Part of it at least appears to be contemporary with the Sopwell range, but there has been much alteration and its upper part, including the roof, has been largely rebuilt. However, even at the north-west corner, behind the modern façade, part of the original framing survives notably a dragon beam at first-floor level.

There are various questions about this building which must at present remain unanswered. The position of the gallery staircase is as yet uncertain; we do not know how much more of the original building existed or how it was planned, nor what its history was before it became in modern times a common lodging

house. At the time of writing it awaits repair and restoration. In the course of future work it may be possible to provide an answer to some of these points but there can be no doubt even now of the importance of this building. It is, first of all, an admirable example of sixteenth-century timber framing. Secondly, it gives a very clear picture of the arrangement and facilities of a sixteenth-century inn, and thirdly, it is important to St. Albans as the best surviving example of the inns that thronged the town in medieval and post-medieval days and were one of its most characteristic features.

Thanks are due to Messrs. Stimpson, Lock & Vince, to Mr. T. Shemeld of Crispin, and to Mr. R. T. Pearce for permission to view the building; to Mr. E. Aldridge and Mr. P. E. Curnow for help with the surveying; and to Mr. J. Brown for the photographs.