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The Renovation of the "Christopher Inn," French Row, St. Albans, 1950-54

A. S. MOODY, A.M.I.C.E., M.INST.M.E., A.M.T.P.I.
City Engineer and Surveyor

IN the immediate post-war years the St. Albans' City Council, like most other District Councils were considering all the aspects of Town Planning and re-development of central areas and the future of French Row caused much discussion and controversy. The owners of the site and some sections of opinion thought that the whole area between French Row and Verulam Road should be cleared to make way for modern redevelopment with a widened French Row.

Fortunately other counsels prevailed and in 1945 a Preservation Order under the Town and Country Planning Acts was made and confirmed. The Order referred to 'The Fleur-de-Lys' and Nos. 2A, 3, 4, 4A and 5, French Row, and provided that they should be maintained in their present form.

The owner of Nos. 2a to 5, who was prevented by the Order from demolishing and redeveloping the property, and who also took the view that it was incapable of being restored to a standard which would produce a satisfactory economic return, then offered it to the Council and in 1949 the purchase was completed.

Having saved the building from demolition and become its owners, the City Council had to decide the best use to which it could be put, and before any schemes could be considered, a detailed survey of the accommodation and its condition had to be made. As may be imagined, this was a task of magnitude—the property was occupied by three shops on the ground floor with living accommodation over one of them and a common lodging-house occupying the remainder. The property had been neglected and mutilated for years.

Many of the internal walls had been covered with match-boarding which could not at that stage be removed and most of the other unoccupied spaces in the roof and basements contained dirt and rubbish

of at least one century, probably more. In one particular instance there was an intriguing difference of about 5 ft. between the ceiling of the first floor and the floor level of the second floor, but when we came to carry out the work at this point it was found that the space was merely filled with dirt and rubbish packed down solid. What lay behind the matchboarding could only be guessed, but as this was used extensively some years ago to cover up basic defects in old property, the worst was feared.

It became obvious during the survey and the subsequent work proved, that the building had been altered and added to during its history in a most confusing way. It would appear that originally the buildings consisted of a group of two-storey medieval cottages of about 20 ft. depth fronting French Row, with later extensions to the rear. The old "Christopher Inn" over and adjoining the Archway at the South end had been formed by extending to the rear and also upwards so that it consisted of four storeys at this point. The upper floor was contained in the roof space and had been used for living accommodation in the past although it was derelict and disused when the City Council became the owners. The medieval roof of the cottages still remains and the extension was formed by merely extending this roof upwards and over the rear extension. A very complicated roof structure resulted with a valley in the centre and the two roof systems were not properly joined together so that at the front the later roof merely rested on the original. This is shown on the section drawing but this only gives a diagrammatic impression of what was in fact, a bewildering mass of timber members of all shapes and sizes and conditions.

The structure consisted mainly of oak framing with brick infilling and external plastering. Parts of the rear extensions are in eighteenth-century brickwork. The front of the building in French Row is cantilevered out at first-floor level.

There are two cellars under the old "Christopher Inn," the walls of one being of flints with courses of Roman tiles, no doubt robbed from Verulamium. The other cellar at the rear had an extension to it in the shape of a tunnel and it was conjectured that it might

prove on investigation to be the beginning of one of the underground passages which are popularly supposed to run under the centre of medieval St. Albans, but when the tons of rubbish which it contained were later cleared out, this supposition was proved to be false.

During the course of the survey it became apparent that the main defects were:—

- (1) Rotting of cills to frames due to defective rain-water drainage for many years.
- (2) The cutting through of structural members in the past to provide new door and window openings.
- (3) Breakages or parting of joints in the timber frame including the breakage of the pegs.
- (4) General sinkage of the building at certain points due to the above defects and this in turn had caused the breaking of some of the structural members themselves.
- (5) Movement and spreading of the roof and building generally, due to the pressure of the roof, the different members of which had not been properly joined together during the alterations and extensions.

The movement of the building had been aggravated by the weight of the rear extension roof acting directly on to the front projecting portion cantilevered out at first-floor level over the pavement.

- (6) Practically all the roofing lathes and pegs holding the tiles were rotten.
- (7) There was evidence of woodworm and death-watch beetle attacks and in fact when the work was stripped down later, extensive infestation was found. As a matter of interest 160 gallons of Rentokil were used.

It was thought that probably the best thing to do would be to repair the roof to prevent further water penetration and consequent deterioration, and work was started on this in 1950, but it proved extremely difficult to carry out, as it was found that as soon as the tiles and battens were removed from the roof the whole thing began to collapse, due to inherent faults

in construction and the only area which could be dealt with was the two-storey portion of the building at the northern end. It was quite unsafe to attempt to work on the higher roof over the "Christopher Inn" and at one time it was feared that the whole roof would collapse into French Row.

It became obvious that very considerable internal support and strengthening was essential to ensure the stability of the building and the location of these strengthening members could quite probably affect the internal rearrangement of the accommodation and consequently the use to which it could be put.

At this time the need for housing accommodation was even more acute than it is today and the City Council were very loath to lose the existing dwelling accommodation in the building. In addition, of course, there were the existing shop tenants who in all fairness had to be offered accommodation in the altered building. Several schemes providing shops on the ground floor with part living and part office accommodation on the upper floors were prepared, but eventually the Council decided that three shops should be provided with office accommodation over. An estimate of the cost of the works was made but it could only be an intelligent guess as so much was unknown about the condition of the hidden parts of the building, but eventually the major work of reconstruction started in 1953 after vacant possession had been obtained with great difficulty, of the major part of the building.

The first stage consisted of clearing out the rubbish from the unoccupied areas and stripping back to the original walls so that a proper assessment of the condition could be made and dozens of lorry-loads had to be collected from very inaccessible spots and carted away.

It was found that adjoining the archway on the south end the main post had sunk letting the whole front down; this was caused by the collapse of the cill into the cellar and the rotting of the foot of the post. The cill had also been cut through at a comparatively recent date so that a new doorway could be formed. The supporting cellar wall adjoining the roadway was also very poor.

A new brick wall was built in the cellar, the post shortened by about 2 ft. and the brickwork carried up

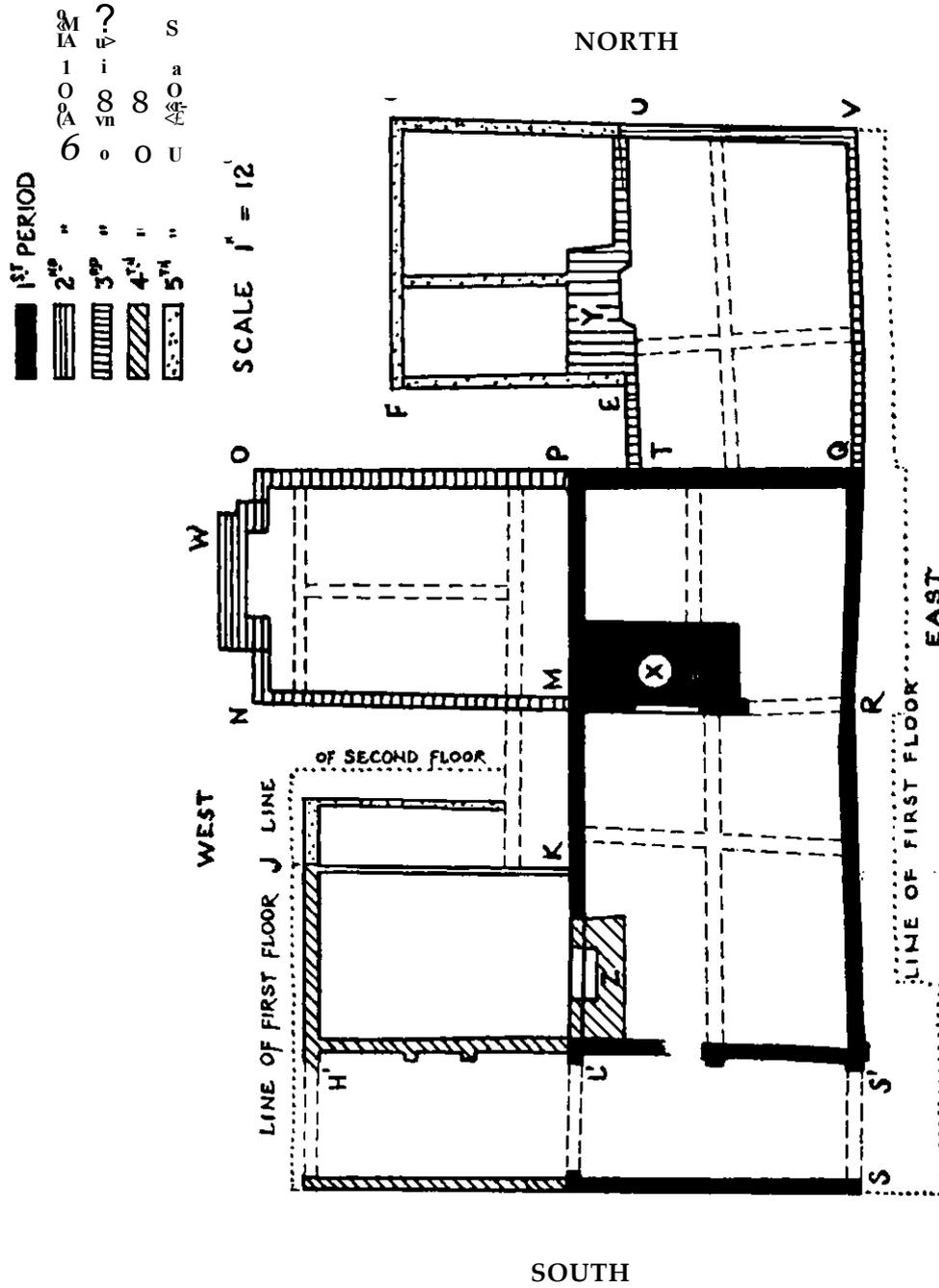


FIG. I

as a pier at this point. With great difficulty steel columns were taken up through the whole height of the building on both the front and centre line of the building. Steel frames were inserted to ensure the stability of the roof structure and many other steel joists were inserted at essential points as the need became apparent during the course of the works and defective timbers were found, and in fact, we had to "feel" our way through the building. These had the effect of taking the weight off the oak frame and eventually a state of structural stability was reached. The roof was retiled using the old tiles as far as possible with galvanised pegs in place of the oak pegs. Part of the rear roof was re-roofed with new matching tiles due to shortage of old tiles. Some of the rafters were replaced and others packed up and the tiles were laid on new battens and roofing felt. This had the effect of destroying to some degree the very wavy roof line but had to be done to make it watertight.

During the course of this work sufficient knowledge had been obtained about the arrangement and structure of the building to enable a reasonable pattern of re-development to be evoked and the main problem was now to decide what to scrap and what to retain. It was obvious, of course, that the external shape and form should be altered as little as possible to the French Row frontage, but that the rear which had become cluttered up with comparatively recent extensions of very poor quality needed to be cleared back to a fairly clear line.

Internally the building had been so damaged and robbed of most of its relics that the impression was one of squalor rather than historical interest. In addition, intense woodworm and death-watch beetle infestation together with rot had been found and therefore it was decided that all defective work should be removed and replaced by modern material of the same character as the original and the internal arrangements replanned so that reasonably modern facilities would be available, but the essential character and atmosphere of the building should be maintained.

When the stripping down was completed it was found that internally the only objects of interest remaining apart from the visible timber framing of the

building were four sixteenth-century wide stone fireplaces, all of which had been badly damaged, but two are of interest with good carving and one of the others in what was probably the chief public room of the inn, is covered with a variety of names and dates scratched on the stonework, the earliest of which is "Roger Tirrill 1622/" Another legend reads "Barnaby Colles among the fooles." These stone fireplaces were cleaned up to a reasonable standard and left exposed, but because of the condition of the flues and fire risks no attempt was made to make them usable as fireplaces for solid fuel.

A certain amount of oak panneling was discovered behind the match-boarding and in the kitchen of the common lodging some quite large areas of damaged panelling were found behind some twenty-seven layers of wallpaper, hessian, sheets of newspaper covered with whitewash and various other decorative finishes. This panelling was gathered together and refixed in one room (the back room of the present restaurant) on the ground floor, and other panelling on the first floor, some of which is carved on the top member, was repaired and left in position where it occurred.

The floors in some instances were still covered with the original old wide oak flooring boards and this was left where possible and re-used in parts, the rest being renewed in oak strips.

It was found in most cases when the comparatively modern lath-and-plaster ceilings were removed (including removing thousands of lath nails), that the floor joists had chamfered edges indicating that they were originally exposed, as was presumably the underside of the floor boards above. It was decided to leave the joists exposed, but to provide additional sound and heat insulation as well as to give a clean but not too smooth and modern an appearance from below, rough textured building board was laid under the floorboards. This when decorated had a very similar appearance to original plaster finishes and greatly enhanced the attraction of the rooms where this treatment could be given.

In two places remnants of wall paintings could be seen but these were so faint as to be indecipherable and they were merely left in position.

There were one or two fragments of decorated plaster ceilings which were in such a bad and loose state that they could not be saved but the "Fleur-de-Lys" pattern of them was very similar to that on a ceiling dated 1586 at St. Michael's Manor in Fishpool Street, St. Albans.

On the first floor fronting French Row a very interesting early sixteenth-century window containing diamond-shaped panes of early plain glass with original lead comes was found plastered over inside and out. It had presumably been dealt with in this way because of water penetration and new windows had been inserted alongside in the early nineteenth century and later. It was decided to leave the modern window in position and make the re-discovered one waterproof so that it could function again. It was felt that to do more than this would inevitably make the front look more heavily restored than was desirable and could easily cause doubts to arise as to the authenticity of the building. For the same reason the front of the gable at the south end was replastered rather than expose the very fine timber framing which was discovered when the original defective external plaster had to be removed.

Externally at the rear when the recently-added back additions were demolished a nicely decorated strip of plaster work became visible by the removal of a chimney stack which had been built close to it.

There is a bracket carved in the form of a female figure at the head of one of the rear posts supporting the archway.

All these features have been retained and every effort made to ensure that the new work fitted in with the old, although it was extremely difficult at first to persuade the craftsmen engaged on it to forget their plumb bobs and spirit levels and work by eye and hand as the original builders had done.

In some respects it was a disappointing task as so little of the original internal details remained but I think that a new lease of life has been given to the building whilst still retaining its character internally and externally the street picture in French Row has been restored to something near the original state. The design of the shop windows was extremely difficult

to decide upon and there has been some mild criticism of them, although I think the decision to use wood in a simple way was the only possible solution. It was quite impossible to leave the shop windows as they were and in any case they were quite modern.

It will be of interest I think, although perhaps not strictly within the scope of these notes that the total cost of the acquisition, repairs and alterations was £21,240 of which £14,800 was for the repairs and alterations, and that the income exceeds the annual expenditure, including repayment of capital and interest, by about £250 per year. This shows that the retention and renovation of these old buildings, whilst being so obviously worthwhile in itself, need not necessarily involve a charge on the owners and one can only hope that the more widely this is realised the better chance our remaining ancient buildings have of survival.

I should like to pay tribute to the work carried out by my Deputy, R. W. Quirk, Esq., A.M.Inst.C.E., A.M.I.Mun.E., A.R.I.C.S., A.M.T.P.I., and my Chief Architectural Assistant, R. Baines, Esq., L.R.I.B.A., whose daily visits and keen interest in the work enabled so much to be done and also to the Council's workmen who carried out, with interest and skill, almost all the practical work involved.

The Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings were consulted at an early stage and reported on the building in 1951. They were kept in contact during the course of the work and agreed with all that was done.

Dr. Elsie Toms, M.A., Ph.D., J.P., has supplied the following notes on the "Christopher Inn":—

"The 'Christopher Inn' was probably built originally in the late fifteenth or early sixteenth century, on the site of an earlier building, and enlarged in the mid-seventeenth century, and again probably in the eighteenth century. It is mentioned in the Survey of St. Albans, taken in the reign of Mary Tudor, 1556, and in 1591 it is recorded that the Mayor and Council, after meeting at the Moot Hall for business, used to adjourn to the 'Christopher' for refreshments. Official feasts were held there, when the Corporation entertained the County, and free ale was distributed to the

common people. It is recorded that David Garrick dined there in 1765. The premises were then possibly larger than they are today, stretching further up French Row. The garden and orchard at the back extended to Dagnall Street.

"In the late eighteenth century, the premises declined in respectability, and it is obvious that by the early nineteenth century, they had become slum tenements, for there is a Council minute, dated 12th January, 1838, reporting a letter from the St. Albans Board of Guardians, asking for the Council's help in the abatement of the nuisance arising from the overcrowded state of the 'Christopher/ which then housed ten families, chiefly paupers, eight of whom were at that time suffering from typhus fever/'

Additional notes on the structure history by P. K. Baillie Reynolds, President

I have added to Mr. Moody's account a note on the possible structural sequence of the various parts of this building. This is based on notes made when the work was in progress, but I regret that my observations were not as full or as accurate as the interest of the building warranted. I can make no claim that my interpretation of the evidence is necessarily the right one, but I do not think that anyone now is in a position to contradict me!

I distinguish five phases of construction.

1. The earliest building on the site appears to have been a rectangular house of approximately 1480-1500, LMPQRS on the plan. The upper floor was jettied over the street on the east, and at the south end it was carried over the entry to the back-yard. At this end there was a gable projecting into French Row 3 ft. beyond the first-floor front, the gable being wider than the entry. There was also a gable at the north end projecting only 1 ft., but this appears to be an alteration.

The walls were timber frames with close vertical studs, which can still be seen in the north wall of the entry, L'S', where one of them is moulded to form the jamb of a door. Some of this studding also survived on the first floor in the wall, LM. The jetty was supported on plain curved brackets, one of which

survives, as does the mortice for another. The south gable was carried on more substantial brackets carried down to ground level.

The roof was of pairs of rafters of small scantling, with collars and no purlins. The struts from the tie-beams shown in the section A-A do not match, and it is probable that the one which is nearly vertical is a replacement, while that at right-angles to the rafter is original. I saw no trace of evidence for a king-post and collar-purlin. The roof of the south gable was of the same type, but that of the north gable has purlins.

2. The western wing, MNOP, is structurally later than the main north to south block, LMPQRS, but probably not much so chronologically. Perhaps it was added when the house became the "St. Christopher Inn." The position of the chimney-stack W suggests that this was the kitchen. The structural remains of the wall, MN, show clearly that it was an external wall, but I did not observe evidence as to whether it was close-studded.

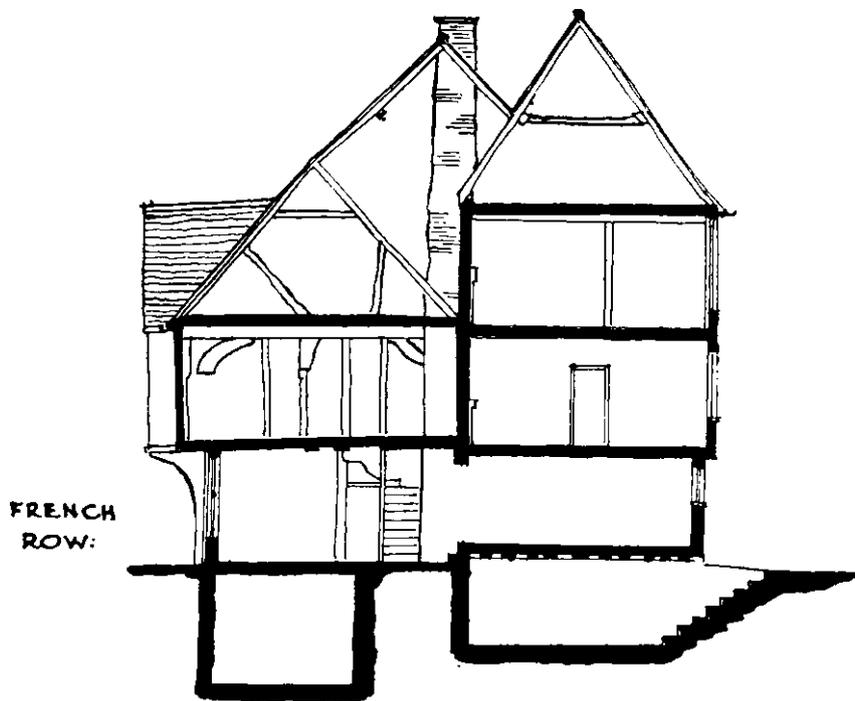
It seems probable that the original roof of the block, LMPQRS, ended on a gable on the wall, P-Q, but that when MNOP was added, the roof of that wing, running east to west, was carried right through to the street-front, the northern gable being formed at that time. The main roof was then cut back to the line of the apex of the transverse roof. But that is mere conjecture.

On the first floor the partition between the room over the entry and the main room (shown in the section A-A) is substantially original, with a curved brace at each end: the partition on the line MR also has a curved brace at each end. The wall, LM, had evidence of one and perhaps two original doorways indicating that access to the first floor was from a gallery on the courtyard side, and indeed there was a beam in position which might have supported such a gallery. The chimney-stack, X, is probably an original feature, though perhaps enlarged when MNOP was added.

3. The next building on the site was the house to the north of that already described. That it was subsequent to the addition of the west wing is shown by its roof running north to south oversailing the prolongation of the east to west roof of that wing. It can be very little later, probably well within the first half

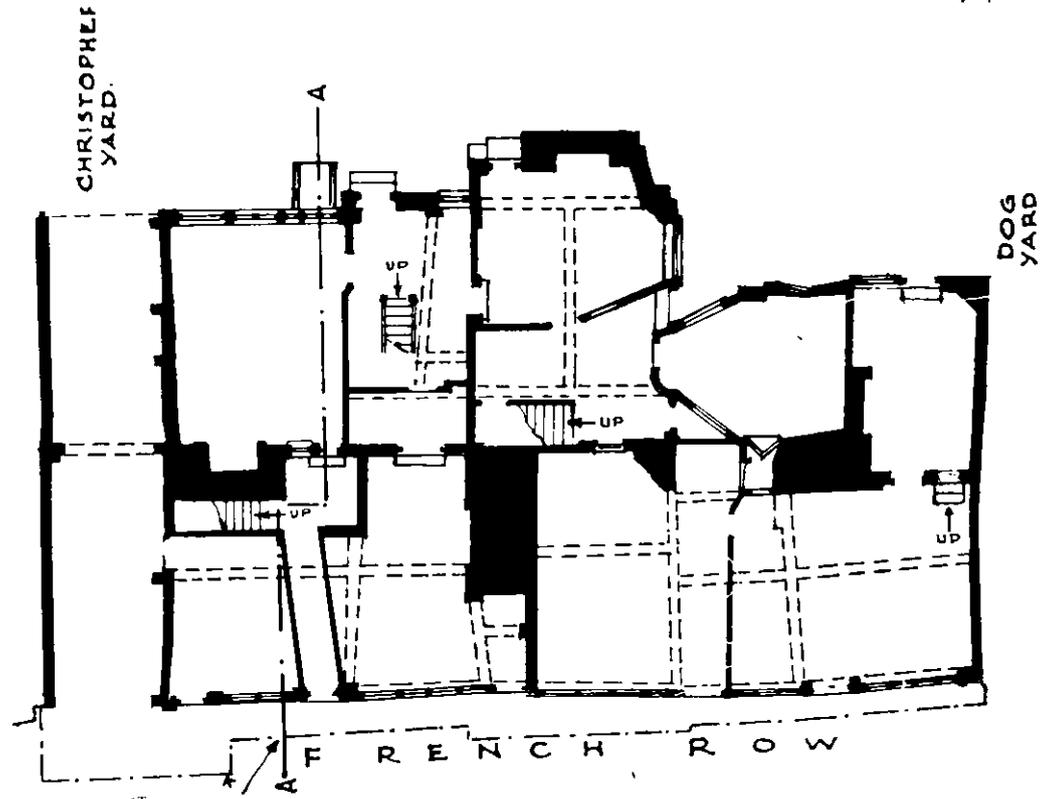


ELEVATION TO FRENCH ROW
FROM ALTERATION.

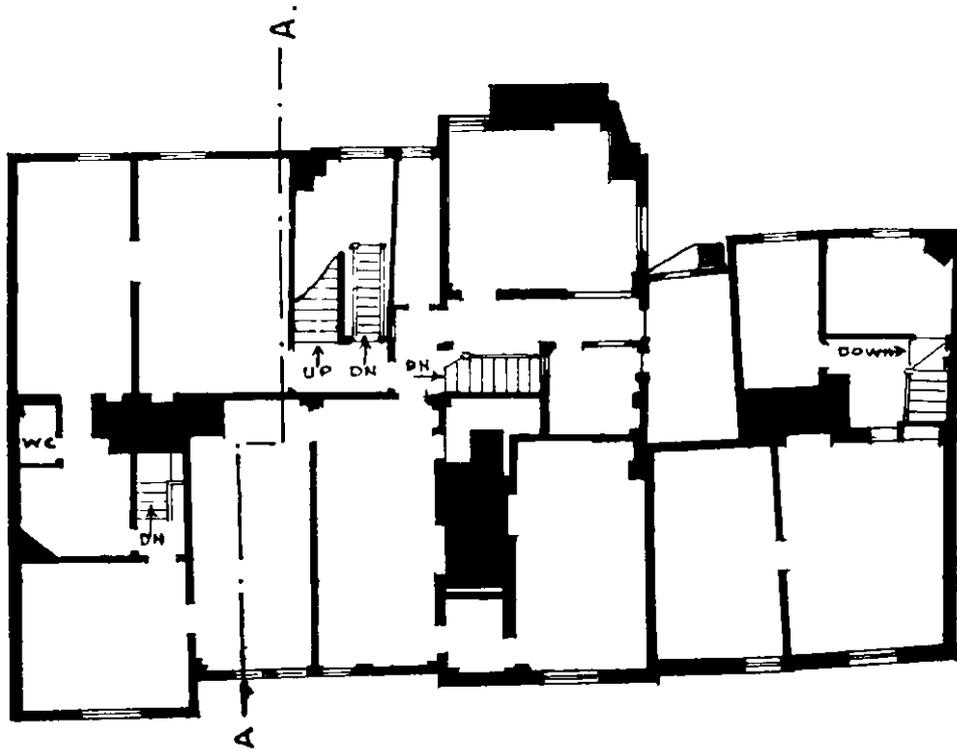


SECTION A.A.

of the sixteenth century. The block QTUV, with its chimney-stack Y is the nucleus of this house, which seems to have been originally quite separate from the Inn. The dimensions of the stack Y suggest that there were a room or rooms west of it, but those which existed in 1951, EFGU, were of eighteenth-century character with two separate gables running east to west. The



LINE OF 1ST FLOOR GROUND FLOOR PLAN.
 BEFORE ALTERATION.
 SCALE 12 FT. TO 1 INCH.



FIRST FLOOR PLAN.
 BEFORE ALTERATION.

façade to French Row, QV, is similar to that of the "St. Christopher."

4. The next stage was the enlargement of the Inn by an addition, LHJK, three storeys high, on the west side of the south end, which doubled the width. This addition was carried over the entry, and the difference in the form construction is clearly seen in the wall S'L'H'. The western portion has no vertical studs, but rectangular panels filled now with brick. Where exactly the north wall of this addition came was not clear, since it had been destroyed by later alterations, but the line JK approximates to it. The carved pilaster and bracket (already mentioned) on the south post of the entry at H gives an indication of the date of this new wing. Instead of providing this addition with a roof of its own, the builder adopted the astonishing expedient of spiking additional rafters on to those of the east slope of the existing roof, so as to double their length, as shown in the section A-A. How the west side of this roof married up with the west wall of this extension is not apparent, for the later alteration shown in the section has obliterated the evidence. This amazing roof was at least provided with a purlin to give it some rigidity, and it derived support also from the great chimney-stack, Z, which, though it intruded into the original structure, was an integral part of this new wing and provided a fireplace on each floor; two of these—on the first and second floors—are of stone, originally painted, and have competently carved friezes and surrounds typical of the period.

This new wing was also provided with a cellar with an entry from the yard, and it is probable that the cellar under the south end of the original building was dug out at the same time. It is certainly not an original feature.

5. In the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century this wing was modernised, possibly owing to a failure of the roof. It was remodelled in the style of the period, and provided with a new roof, with hipped ends. This roof had A-shaped trusses, with purlins at the collar, as shown in the section A-A, and the cut-off rafters of the old roof were supported on its purlin. An additional attic floor was provided between the tie-beams and the collars. This floor apparently was

unlit. A staircase serving first and second floors was provided in the space between this wing and the kitchen wing, where there had probably been one since the construction of this wing. From the second floor up to the attic a staircase was provided within the second-floor room by jettied this floor out 2 ft. at its north end, the projection being supported on a diagonal strut at the north-west angle of the wing. This arrangement shows that the space between the south-west wing and the kitchen wing was at that time still open.

This space, and the space between the kitchen wing and EPGU were filled in with other structures during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the façade to French Row was mutilated by the insertion of various doors, windows and shop-fronts. The great majority of the main uprights of the main timber frame of street façade were cut away, so that serious faults developed, as has been described above. Some relief was obtained by cast-iron struts in various places, but more drastic remedies have been needed to rehabilitate these two interesting houses and to preserve them for posterity.