

NO. 17 PALACE STREET, CANTERBURY

By E. W. PARKIN

PALACE STREET, Canterbury, dates from 1086, when Archbishop Lanfranc extended the western boundary of the cathedral grounds by pulling down twenty-eight tenements, and diverting the Roman road which led south from Northgate around the awkward bends now known as The Borough, into the present line of Palace Street.¹

The tenants thus displaced were presumably compensated with plots on the west side of the street, as these still number twenty-eight there today.

Along the east side of the street runs the outer wall of the palace grounds, behind which are several buildings, some of which now belong to King's School.

In this wall is a large gateway which has always been the entrance into Palace Court, and formerly into the palace. It was originally constructed of stone and flint, but was rebuilt in red brick by Archbishop Parker in 1561, though the stone jambs of the early gateway still remain.

Directly facing the gateway on the west side of Palace Street is a narrow lane or passage, now closed by double doors. Three doors south of this is no. 17, reputed to have been the site of the house of one, Gilbert the Citizen, which became for a few brief hours the headquarters of the four knights who murdered Becket on the fateful day in December, 1170.

It is indeed interesting to look more closely at this house, and at any evidence there may be to support this tradition.

We are fortunate in having the unique plan of the cathedral buildings as Becket knew them. This is the famous Norman drawing of c. 1165, discovered in the great Psalter of Eadwin at the library of Trinity College, Cambridge. It has been reproduced a number of times, and was traced by Willis in 1867,² though unfortunately the plan does not include Lanfranc's palace, nor the street beyond it.

We know little enough about Gilbert, except that he lived close to the palace gateway.³ A reference of 1215 gives the name 'Gilbert de

¹ *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxiv (1969), 201.

² *Arch. Cant.*, vii (1868), plates 1 and 2.

³ W. G. Urry, *Canterbury under the Angevin Kings*, 184.

Aula', who was then in possession of ground here to the east of the Stour, and perhaps taking his name from the proximity of his dwelling to the archbishop's hall.⁴

NO. 17 PALACE STREET

No. 17 has recently (in 1972) been made available for inspection by the public, and it is indeed a very interesting building. It has a Norman undercroft set back from the street, which is old enough to have been part of Gilbert's house. The present street front is finely timbered, but this is a reconstruction by an owner named Powell, early this century (Pl. IA).

The ground floor room has a fine seventeenth-century fireplace of narrow red brick, 8 ft. wide (2.44 m.), above which was discovered the painted royal coat of arms of Charles I (Pl. IB). The room above has a similar, but smaller fireplace and coat of arms. Immediately to the right of the ground floor one is a square-headed doorway with seventeenth-century mouldings and stops, giving on to a steep stairway leading down into the undercroft (Figs. 1 and 4). This undercroft has walls of flint rubble 2 ft. 6 in. thick (0.76 m.), and measures internally 12 ft. 6 in. by 15 ft. 8 in. (6.55 by 4.78 m.). It has a doorway with a semi-circular stone arch at its north end, which is the entrance to a short tunnel, blocked by modern breeze blocks at 5½ ft. (1.68 m.). On the east side of the cellar is a similar blocked stone doorway, and two deeply splayed loop windows.

Facing these in the west wall is a fourteenth-century stone doorway with a pointed arch, leading up into the garden. This doorway is obviously inserted, as the joists above it have been cut away and a trimmer put in. South of it is part of a two-light stone window of similar date.

The arches of the two round-headed doorways are only 5 ft. 1 in. (1.55 m.) above the existing seventeenth-century brick floor, and this suggests that the original floor must lie at least a foot below this.

The two loop windows on the east side (Pl. IIA) make it reasonably certain that the Norman house which once stood here had a small courtyard between it and the street, no doubt made necessary by external stairs both to the hall above, and down to the surviving cellar doorway. This arrangement was not uncommon in towns at that time, where the proximity of other buildings made difficult the siting of the usual external stairs. Known examples of this in Canterbury include the hall and undercroft built as the first pilgrims' hospice by Edward FitzOdbold about 1175, and now part of Eastbridge Hospital; also the Norman building which preceded the fifteenth-century Guild-

⁴ *Ibid.*, 185.

NO. 17 PALACE STREET, CANTERBURY

hall in Canterbury.⁵ This stood back from the street, and is believed to have been the Borough Guild mentioned in Domesday.

The undercroft at no. 17 Palace Street was never vaulted, it was ceiled with 10 in. (0.25 m.) square oak joists set close together, which were probably designed to take flagstones and a hearth in the hall above. This arrangement was fairly common in small Norman houses in

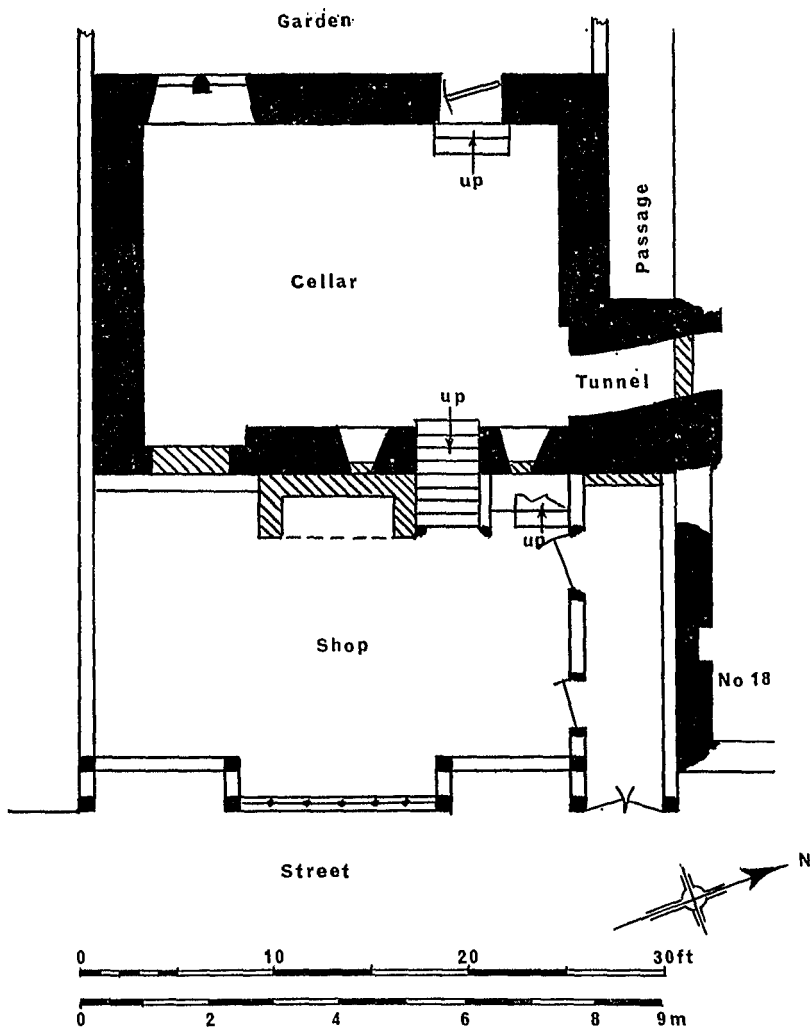


FIG. 1. Plan of Shop and Cellar of no. 17.

⁵ *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxiii (1968), 8.

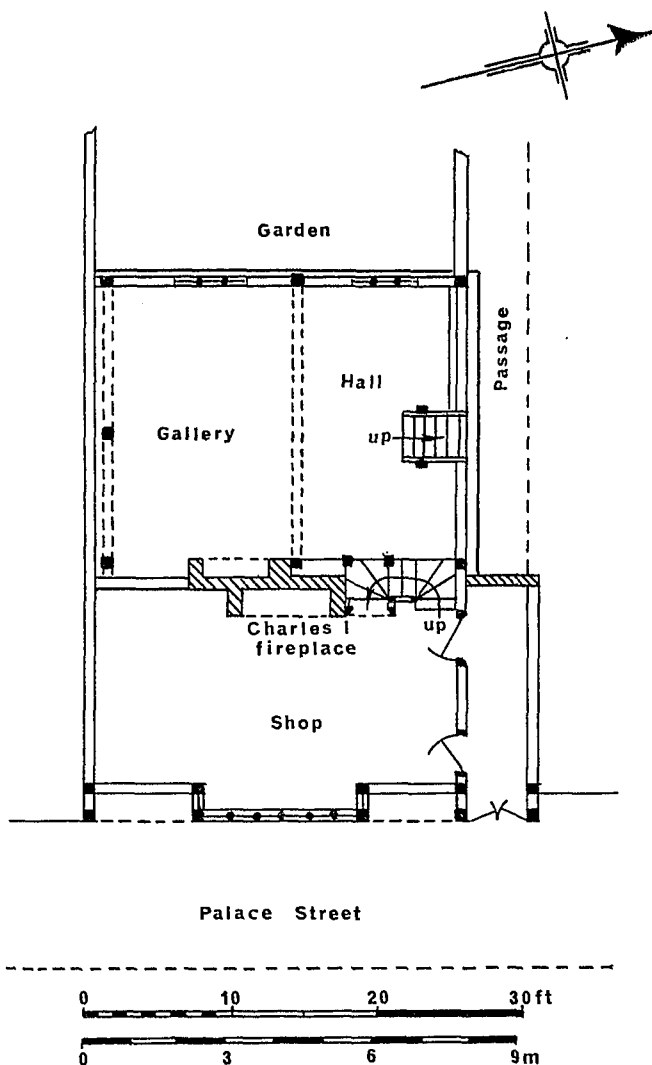


FIG. 2. Plan of Shop and Old Hall.

Kent; in fact, of those examined less than half had been built with stone vaulting.

The first-floor Norman hall here also had thick walls of flint, as is shown by a small part of the walling which still survives above floor level at the north end of the present hall.

Sometime in the fourteenth century, the stone and flint hall was replaced by the present timber-framed one. This is unusual, in that half

NO. 17 PALACE STREET, CANTERBURY

of it is still open to the roof, presumably as a smoke bay, the southern half being occupied by a large gallery or open loft. Although the gallery rail has been renewed, there is no doubt that this was built as part of the timber-framed hall, and always was an open gallery, and not an enclosed upper room. The principal beam is morticed and pegged into the main central posts of the hall, and is supported by heavy curved braces at each end. Above the gallery, the main posts and other timbers show no mortices, which would be there if there had ever been a partition.

A curious feature is the roof, which is of the collar purlin type, but without a crown post, and set transversely across the hall, ending in a half hip on the west, or garden side (Fig. 3).

Some repair work is evident, but the hall, with the exception of the windows is very much as it was built. The garden façade is particularly fine.

The seventeenth-century shop, with the two floors above it, retains all its original timber-framing except the rebuilt street front. This

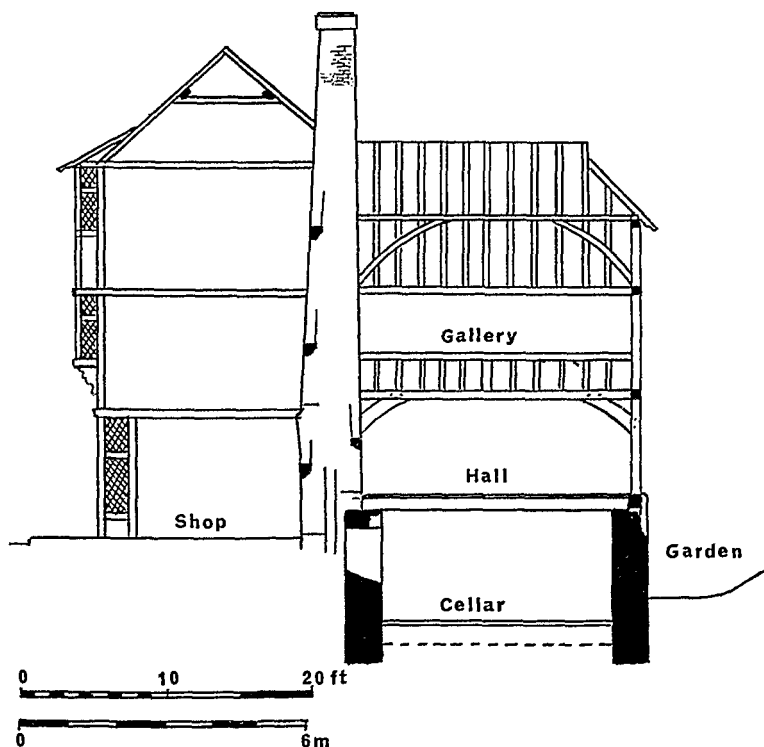


FIG. 3. Section of Building looking South.

part of the building has a number of interesting features, though one has to be a little wary of the late Mr. Powell's skill as a restorer.

Inside the street entrance is some genuine seventeenth-century panelling, though it must have been brought from elsewhere, as a through passage existed here until recent times. The shop has matching, but imitation panelling, and genuine seventeenth-century floorboards believed to have been brought from upstairs. The four fireplaces have all been restored to their original condition, there being one on each of the three floors, and another inserted into the hall under the gallery.

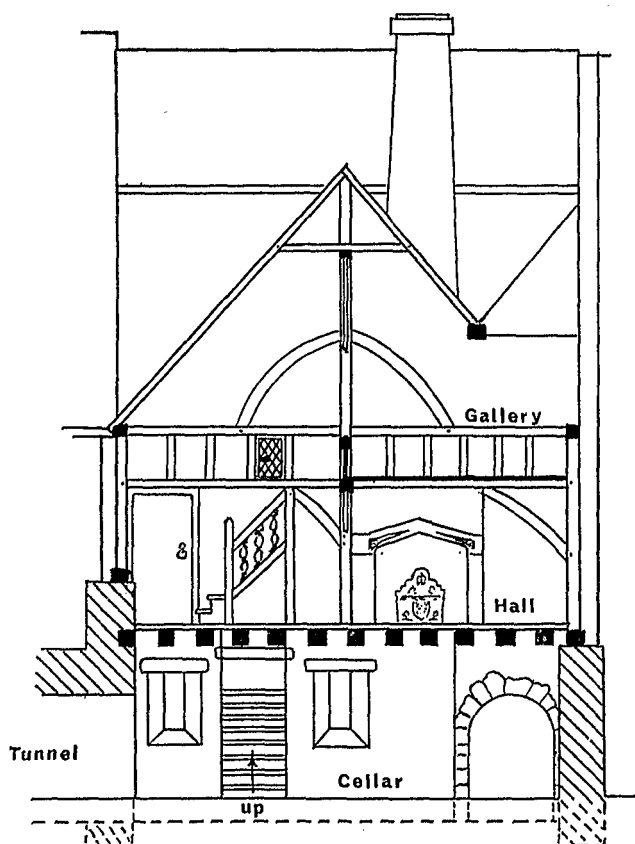


FIG. 4. Section of Hall looking East.



A. The Street Front of no. 17 Palace Street.



B. The Charles I Fireplace and Coat of Arms.



A. The north-east Corner of the Norman Cellar.



B. The Gallery and Part of the Hall.

The oak joists seen in the front rooms are original; mortises and marks on these show that this part was built with a bay window on the ground floor and an oriel above, but shallower than the present ones. Most of the doors and other fittings are old, but of various dates.

THE CONNECTION WITH No. 18

The purpose of the tunnel leading off from the north end of the undercroft was at first a mystery, until permission was obtained to examine the property next door, no. 18. This is mainly a seventeenth-century timber-framed building standing on a narrow 11 ft. wide plot (3·35 m.). Some ancient walling still survives in the cellar there, and shows that a very early stone and flint building stood here on the street line, and end on to it. A massive brick arch supports the inserted fireplaces above it, and under this is the third round-headed stone doorway which marks the north end of the tunnel. This tunnel was obviously designed to connect the two cellars beneath a stone flagged passage which has always existed between the two buildings. Although it is now blocked inside the lobby entrance of no. 17, the rear part of the passage still remains; in fact, within living memory, it is said to have been used by a horse to gain access to the yard and stable at the rear. The upper rooms of the rear of no. 18 extend over the flagged passage.

It would seem thus that the narrow stone building which once stood on the site of no. 18 may have been an outbuilding belonging to the Norman house. The site was in any case the largest and perhaps the most important one in the street, no. 17 alone occupying 30 ft. of the frontage (9·15 m.), and appears to confirm Dr. Urry's sketch map of the street,⁶ which shows the house of Gilbert the Citizen here, with Anselm, secretarius, as his neighbour on the north side, and Eadward, the son of Odbold, beyond him, about the middle of the twelfth century.

In mediæval times, the most important family living hereabouts was that of the Staplegates, who took the old name of this district. A deed pertaining to Eastbridge Hospital and dated 42 Ed. III (1369) gives as witness the name of Edmund Staplegate, bailiff of the city,⁷ while in 1524 the death of Robert Staplegate is recorded. He is described as being of 'St. Alphege', and of '... possessing several tenements in this hamlet'.⁸

The affluent seventeenth-century owner who added the two storied timber front cannot so far be traced. The royal coats of arms suggest

⁶ W. G. Urry, *op. cit.*, map section.

⁷ Hasted, *History of the County of Kent*, 2nd edn., vol. XI, 293.

⁸ *Op. cit.*

E. W. PARKIN

the date 1625, for in that year Charles I not only acceded to the throne, but also married Princess Henrietta of France at the Abbey of St. Augustine at Canterbury on 13th June.

The undercroft is part of what must be one of the oldest houses yet discovered in Canterbury, or indeed anywhere else in the kingdom. As already mentioned, visitors are welcomed to see for themselves this ancient place; a small fee is charged to aid diocesan funds.

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