

The Merchant's House. 1450-1520. High Street, Lakenheath.

An old badly damaged scrap book began the search for this house which has been identified as a late medieval/early Tudor merchant's house. We think it was demolished around 1914.

This house can be used show the development of the village from the ancient feudal fiefdom of Ely towards the development of a society where it was possible for quite 'ordinary' folk to 'make good' through entrepreneurial businesses. Alongside the changes in tenancies which supported the growth of tenant farmers was the surge in businesses - 'merchants', who provided raw material bought from farmers like wool. We don't know what the builder of this house did to become well-off: we do know that throughout Suffolk, (and elsewhere in England) the 14th and 15th centuries saw an enormous surge in wealth through the farming and processing of wool into cloth which was exported across the continent.

The Merchant's House provides a link to the village at the very end of the feudal period when a very different dwelling became a possibility for the very prosperous villager.

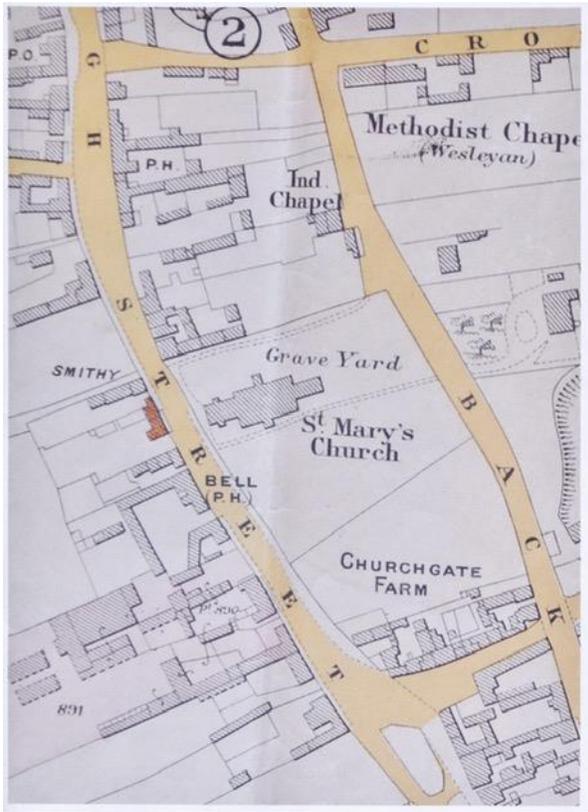


The house as it appeared in the scrapbook.

An alternative view of the thatched house on the left just behind the two men.

On the right behind the wall and trees is the churchyard. This photograph and local maps confirmed the position of the house in the village.





The map shows the precise position in 1914/15 of what we first called 'the Old House' directly opposite the church. Churchgate farm appears incorrectly sited but this is probably due to space available on the map.

Map taken from the catalogue of 'The Retreat' sale of 1914/15.

A well-known expert on ancient buildings, Matthew Champion of MJC Associates, was consulted with the following result:

From: Matt Champion
Date: 3 February 2021 at 23:02:01 GMT
To: David Jones
Subject: RE: LHG Old building in the Village

Hi David,

Many thanks for that. Very intriguing photographs, and a very interesting building. So, these are just a few initial thoughts, and I would love to be more precise, but given the nature of the evidence, that really isn't possible.

So you have a building of two main ranges, one parallel to the street, and the other end on. Worth remembering in the first instance that they may not all be of one construction phase.

Range one - end on to the street. Appears to have a slight jetty front projecting into the street, and above a line of openings that go pretty much the full width of the range. This looks like an early shop frontage, similar to ones you can still see today in Lavenham or Southampton. The presence of the jetty frontage of this type, in this area, probably gives us a pre-1600 date. However, from what can be seen of the timber frame (which isn't a lot), it appears fairly lightweight, so we are looking at the later period rather than the earlier.

Range two - really difficult to say much about this, as so little is visible. There is a hint of a horizontal timber at about the right height for a jetty front, but the ground floor has seen so many alterations that there isn't a lot that can be said with confidence. Chimney stacks - both are interesting and I wouldn't like to say which is original - if either. The one in range one has pretty early bricks visible in the lower courses, but beyond that it is impossible to say too much more.

If I was asked to offer an opinion as to age and function, based solely upon what is in the photographs, I would have to say somewhere between 1450 and 1580, and most likely a relatively wealthy merchant's dwelling, with shop/workshop at one end, fronting on to the street. My 'gut' feeling, if pressed, is towards the earlier end of that scale - 1450-1520.

I hope that helps.

best wishes,

Matt

Matthew then asked for more information about the site. We told him about the barber's shop which was there until the late 1930's.

On 4 Feb 2021, at 22:04, Matthew Champion wrote:

Hi David,

Before responding more fully, can you tell me a little about the site? Has it been at all developed since this structure was demolished?

Best wishes,

Matt



Clift's barber shop. Circa 1938

Hi David and Hermione,

Many thanks for the additional info. I've had a chance to go through the historical map record as well now. The old house appears still to be shown on both the 1881 and 1903 OS maps, but is gone by the 1940s - at which time the barber's shop is shown at the front of the plot, with another structure at the rear.

The reason I was asking about the development history of the site is really in respect of the likelihood of their being significant archaeological remains of the early house still present. Given the more temporary nature of the barber's shop, and the fact that the later development was set well back from the street frontage, I would suggest that this is likely to be the case.

To summarise, we have what appears to be a late medieval or Tudor dwelling of some substance located on the street frontage of the plot. No significant development has subsequently taken place in this area of the plot. It is therefore my professional opinion that it is highly likely that there are significant archaeological remains of the original property still largely intact and present on the site as it stands today. If the site is to be developed at any point in the future then some form of archaeological mitigation will be required.

I hope that helps.

Best wishes,

Although the building was clearly a wreck before WWI, in the 15th and 16th centuries it was once the home of a prosperous family.

The Village in the 12th-16th centuries.

From early Saxon times travelling traders who became called pedlars or chapmen, traded from village to village selling such things as needles and scissors but also selling anything they could come by: those 'little extras' such as ribbons, herbal medicines, and cloth to the 'ordinary' villeins. They also brought 'news'.

Lakenheath village would have been worth coming to. By the end of the 14th century it had recovered from the Black Death, and there were around *40 cottages sited on the west side of the High Street where the better cottages stood. There were others on the eastern slopes near what is now Back Lane going northwards.

**How we lived in Lakenheath 600 Years Ago'. 1970. Rev. John Munday.*

During the 14th -16th centuries a poll tax was levied throughout the country on all adults over the age of 14 apart from the very poorest. *An incomplete record shows that in 1524, 42 villagers in Lakenheath paid this tax and by 1603 there were 273 adults in the village.

**Suffolk Heritage Explorer. heritage.suffolk.gov.uk*

[Click here to read about Feudal Lakenheath 1042-1547.](#)

At the end of 14th century there were far fewer 'unfree peasants' and villagers were able to work for themselves or to seek paid employment. There was work for skilled villagers and it was normal for some to make at least part of their living by a trade whilst still working the land, for example brewing beer or ale to sell from their cottages and by the early 15th century the village economy was sufficient to support trades such as the blacksmith or butcher or tailor which were well established. As the century progressed a few prosperous farmers in the village took advantage of the lucrative product of the time, wool, and grazed their flocks on the then vast Lakenheath Warren and they could employ both domestic and outdoor servants as well as farm labourers. One of them, William Lacy, John Lacy's father, bequeathed a sum of money to go towards providing the church with the benches (pews) which are still in use, and bells were added to the church tower. The prosperity of yeomen farmers like the Lacy family led to an enhanced lifestyle and status which is reflected in their Wills and by the 16th century inhabitants were making significant bequests to the church.

Three Wills show the prosperity of the village at this time.

Thomas Gigner of Undley (1497) left amongst other possessions silver spoons to his daughters.
Katherine Cook (1522) left her feather bed and green gown and best kirtle to her daughter Margaret, and to several grandchildren and god-daughters three pairs of each
Thomas Mann (1529) left his wife 'all my household stuff within my house'.

J Munday Lakenheath Records.

The Lakenheath Merchant.

Whatever it was that our merchant supplied he was successful at it! Whilst we have not been able to find out what he (?) actually traded a very likely answer is that he was involved in some way in the Suffolk wool trade as a clothier or perhaps more likely as a draper.

15th century descriptions of textile merchants.

Clothier. -Often entrepreneurial, often involved in all aspects of the production of cloth. **Draper.** - The supply and distribution of cloth. **Mercer.** Supply of high-quality textiles such as linen and silk.

By 1460 Suffolk was the largest wool textile producer in the country and Bury St. Edmunds became the main market for woollen cloth (broadcloth) in the country. *David Addy says that half of Bury's export trade was through Kings Lynn via the rivers Lark and Little Ouse and there is good reason to think that there was a weaving mill at **Mildenhall in 1455.

**St. Edmundsbury Chronicle 2000. **Prof. Mark Bailey.*

Broadcloth appealed to the better off yeoman but it was taxed, whereas cheaper substitutes such as kerseys-cloth produced in the village of Kersey, and handywarps- broad heavy-wearing baize cloth were not. The cheaper cloth became popular amongst small tenant farmers and the this created a demand which only a merchant could supply. The 'commoners' in the village like William Lacy probably preferred the more expensive broadcloth and certainly wore it on Sundays at church. It's likely that our merchant sold other textiles such as linen and 'fancies' such as ribbon and embroidery silks to cater for the more affluent villager.

Merchants needed to be financially secure, to maintain a 'good reputation' amongst other merchants as reliable payers, and to have the means to invest in stock. The ability to anticipate and supply future needs and fashions demanded not only knowledge and contacts but also the necessary cash with which to do deals.

**It was common to have more than one means of earning a living as a means of guarding against hard times. Merchants were well placed to do this being prosperous enough to either invest in land or to farm it. They could also be part of the cloth production process such as weaving or dyeing*.*

***Merchant Adventurer or Jack of All Trades? The Suffolk Clothier in the 1460s'. Nicholas R Amor.*

At any rate it was normal for most villagers to have more than one way of earning their living. Our merchant, like many of his type will have had a few 'irons in the fire.

The Merchant's House.

This house was certainly much more comfortable than the smaller and darker cottages lived in by most village families which would have been mainly single storied cottages with one or two rooms and with few unglazed windows and an open central fireplace. At best such cottages might have extended into the roof space by means of a simple ladder. A later version of these houses can still be seen in Anchor Lane.



These cottages were mainly built of chalk blocks or flint rubble and could be added to by the occupant. It has been suggested that air dried clay bricks may also have been used. The degradation of clay by wind, rain and damp, not to mention fire, is said to be one reason why none of these early cottages remained for much more than a generation. About the only similarity between the cottages and the merchant's house is the thatched roof!

Although timber was scarce on the fen edge, and therefore expensive to obtain, a timber framed house could provide several rooms on more than one floor and with more windows. The introduction of window glass in place of horn or shutters towards the end of this period was an indication of wealth as were chimneys which could reduce smokey interiors. A dedicated cooking area or kitchen and sleeping rooms further improved comfort. It's likely that the house built by John Lacy (Lacy's House, Hall Drive) at the other end of the village was broadly similar in construction although possibly a bit larger. The location of the merchant's house opposite the church is also a likely indication of the status of the building close as it was to the Manor Hall and barn. The comparison noted by Matthew Champion between this house and some houses in Lavenham further shows the rise in prosperity in the village.