

THE TOWN HOUSE IN MEDIEVAL AND EARLY MODERN BRISTOL

HISTORIC BUILDING REPORT

NO. 15 SMALL STREET, BRISTOL

From

Roger H Leech MA PhD FSA MIFA

Visiting Professor of Archaeology

University of Southampton

Avenue Campus

Highfield

Southampton SO17 1BJ

Tel (Home office): +44 (0)1794 518185

Email: R.Leech@soton.ac.uk

© Copyright English Heritage and Roger H Leech. This report may not be produced in whole or in part without permission.

No 15, Assize Courts Hotel (see illustrations below)

A house formerly of three storeys and an attic (see illustration below), now reduced to two, stands over a brick cellar at the rear of the plot. It is built parallel to the street with one room on each floor, with tall sash windows on the principal W elevation. The principal room on the 1st floor has a ribbed plaster ceiling of geometric design, with pendants, a moulded cornice and decorative frieze, of the early 17th century (see illustration below).

On the ground floor no early features are visible. The cellar below is barrel vaulted in narrow bricks and could be contemporary with the rooms above (see illustration below). It is linked to other cellars extending to the street frontage. Survey showed that there were of at least five separate builds, three of which have fairly recent brick barrel vaults. Of much earlier date is the main cellar 12.20m in length extending back from the street frontage and a short length of two centred arched vault, both built in stone bonded in red/brown mortar.

The detached building at the rear was clearly only part of the house then existing and must have been linked by a pentice, either that still in use or its predecessor, to the parts closer to the street. There is also no evidence for a staircase in the detached block; quite possibly therefore there could have been a kitchen on the ground floor, as conventionally with detached blocks of this type, and a principal parlour above which was completely separate.

Central to any discussion or examination of this building must be the paper by Hirst.¹ His paper was concerned principally with the chimneypiece (see illustration below), since removed.

‘I shall have comparatively little to say about the house, and it is the chimneypiece in the state room which I chiefly desire to describe and illustrate. The exterior of the house is to a large extent hidden by other buildings and additions, and one side only is visible and this shows no features of much interest. The character of this exterior is very similar, particularly in respect of the windows, to that of the group of buildings formerly standing immediately on the opposite side of the street ...’.

Hirst thought that the chimneypiece had sufficient similarities to that at the Langton mansion, no 12 Welsh Back, dated to 1623, to be by the same hand. The Small Street chimneypiece was thought to have been built with the room, the ornamental cornice running around the room and over the chimneypiece. ‘In this plaster cornice appear a number of casts repeating some of the coats of arms on the chimneypiece, and also the letters H.B.E. which are in the cornice over the chimneypiece’.

Hirst did not think it *‘necessary to describe every detail of the chimney piece. The illustration shews a top cornice and a lower cornice, the upper supported by caryatides on the outer angles and intermediate*

¹ Hirst 1927

Corinthian pilasters, the lower supported by caryatides on the outer angles. The upper part has a centre panel with an elaborate shield of arms, and five carved panels on the right and left hand sides and underneath the centre panel. These panels are quaintly carved representations of the senses :- (1) Sight, a lady looking at her face in a mirror, (2) Hearing, a figure playing on a guitar, and a stag - emblem of quick hearing, (3) Taste, a figure eating fruit and holding a bunch of grapes to a monkey, (4) Smell, a figure holding a bunch of flowers and a pot of flowers, (5) Touch, a figure holding a bird in right hand in act of biting, and on left a tortoise attempting to bite. Underneath the shield of arms is the date 1526, which is merely painted, not carved like the rest of the work; in the centre of the cornice over the chimneypiece is a small plaster shield. Various coats of paint have obliterated any letters on this shield, but undoubtedly it bore the letters H.B.E. as is proved by a sketch in the Braikenridge collection made nearly 100 years ago, where they are plainly shewn'.²

The coat of arms depicted on the ceiling frieze and on the chimneypiece was convincingly argued by Hirst to be that Humphrey Brown, a prominent Bristol merchant who died in 1629, the initials those of himself and Elizabeth his wife. The house as recorded by Hirst is clearly shown on air photographs of 1921 (see illustration below).³ It was of three storeys and an attic, painted white, roofed with pantiles, with rebated sash windows to the 1st and 2nd floors, and four hipped dormer windows to the attic. Another building provided a link to the buildings on the street frontage.

Parts of the house with the chimneypiece and decorated plaster ceiling still remain. The surviving parts include the external walls and the 1st-floor room with the ceiling (see illustration below), but less the chimneypiece. The latter was acquired by the Cincinnati Art Museum in Ohio, USA, where it now forms part of the displays.⁴

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Harris, J 2007 *Moving Rooms: the Trade in Architectural Salvage*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press

Hirst, H C M 1927 'A 17th century house and chimneypiece in Small Street, Bristol'. *Trans Bristol Glos Archaeol Soc* **49**, 203-220

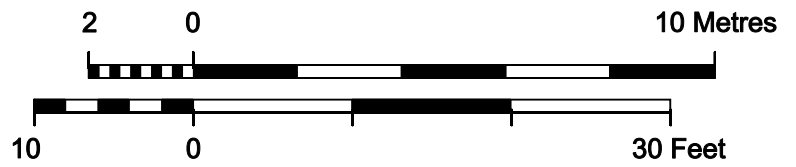
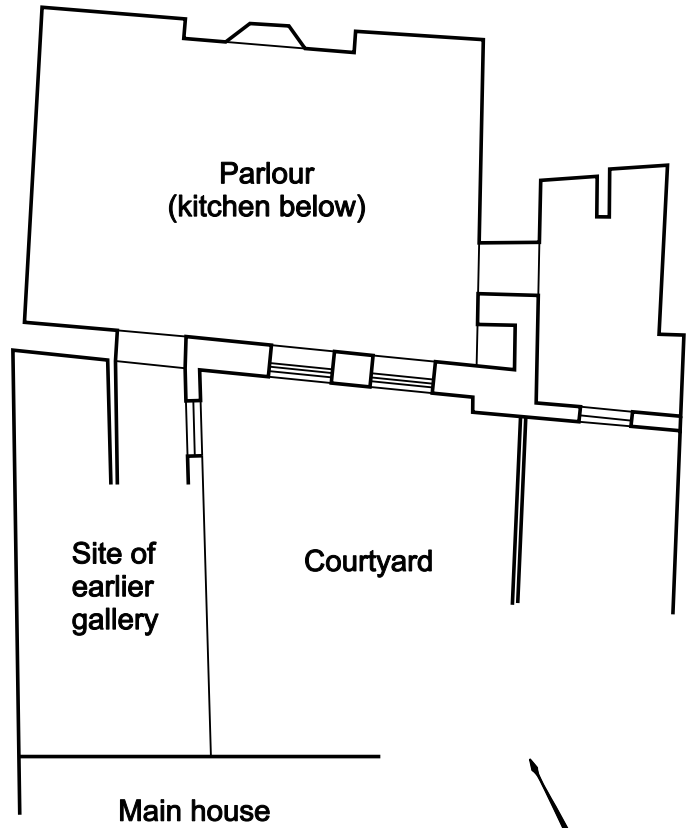
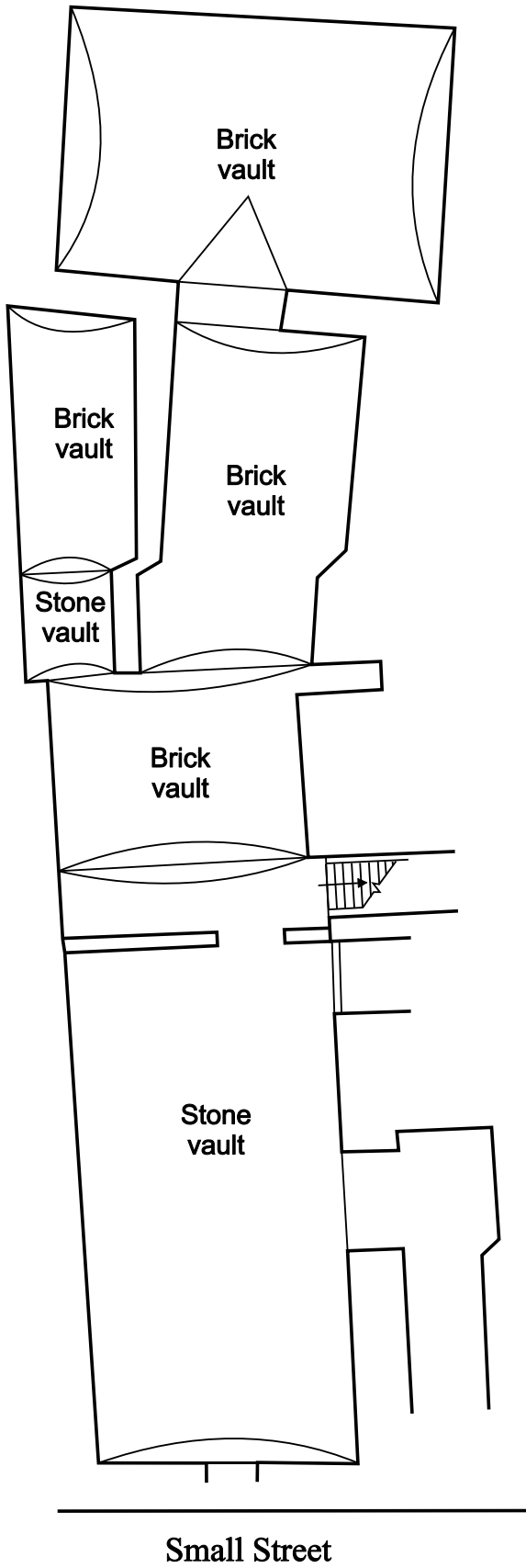
² Hirst 1927,212

³ Aerofilms 5427, 5429

⁴ Harris 2007, 185 and information from Tim Hennies, the librarian to the Art Museum

CELLARS

FIRST FLOOR



No.15 Small Street, plan of cellars and first floor of detached parlour block (RHL, PEC).



Small Street, no 15, detached parlour block to the rear: visible are the first and attic floors - detail from air photograph of 1921 (NMR Aerofilms 5427)



Small Street, no 15, detached parlour block to the rear, ceiling of the early 17th century, photograph of 1979 (RHL)



No.15 Small Street, detached parlour block, chimneypiece of 1620s depicting the five senses (NMR Country Life collection, CC40/00238)



Small Street, no 15, detached parlour block to the rear, cellar, photograph of 1979 (RHL)