

17—19 LONDON STREET, READING

By H. Godwin Arnold

Reading is a town of far greater historical and architectural interest than is commonly believed. Its oldest parish church, St. Mary's, celebrated its millenium in 1979. Reading Abbey, refounded in 1121 by King Henry I was one of the six great abbeys of England. Hugh Faringdon, the last abbot, was one of the English Catholic Martyrs. Leland wrote of the town that it 'standeth by clothing'. Sir John Betjeman writes 'No town in the South of England hides its attractions more successfully from the visitor'.¹ The clothing trade, the Abbey, and successful concealment all have place in the account which follows.

Properly speaking Reading is not a Thames-side town at all. Its origin is on a gravel ridge immediately north of the River Kennet where a route from the south crosses that river, heading towards a crossing of the Thames a mile further north which meets a number of ancient routes descending from the chalk hills of the Chilterns. At the crossing of the Kennet was established the Danish settlement and traditionally it was here that Queen Elfrida founded a nunnery where now is the Minster Church of St. Mary.

The Abbey was built on the same gravel ridge close to the Kennet and raised above the marshy plain of the Thames. The site chosen was about half a mile down-stream and from the relationship between this and the older settlement is developed the plan of the mediaeval town. A winding street, Minster Street, runs north eastward between the two. The Abbot established a market place at the gate of the Abbey and from the point, south of the town, where the route from the south begins to descend from the chalk hilltop a second, new road diverged, heading towards the Abbey and forming, with the other roads, the triangular plan which is the historic centre of Reading.

This new road, leading to the Abbey and flanked by Abbey land, is London Street with London Road, the route westward from London joining it, not in the valley bottom, but a quarter of a mile or so uphill on dry ground. London Street, a wide street curving gently uphill and lined for the most part with Georgian frontages, is Reading's most handsome street and a Conservation Area.

In 1946 Leslie Harman wrote a History of the Parish of St. Giles-in-Reading, the parish which includes both London Street and the older approach, Southampton Street. A document which he used was a *Survey of the Burrough and Manor of Reading taken by Roger Days, September 6, Edward VI*. From this, with information compiled from the parish accounts, he made a comprehensive description of the parish in 1552, an annotated sixteenth century parish directory. For the house with which we are concerned his description (expanding abbreviations) reads:-

'Tenement and garden and rood of Land (19 London Street) owner and occupier THOMAS ALDWORTH. It was assessed at 2/-. In his will dated 1576 Thomas Aldworth, clothier, mentions several tenements owned by him in London Street and Silver Street . . . It was the house now under consideration that he occupied in 1552 and at least as late as 1560. Thomas was street warden in 1541, burgess in 1542, constable 1544, alderman in 1550, mayor in 1551 and 1557, Member of Parliament in 1558 and 1559 and a Capital Burgess in 1560 . . . for the parish church he had acted as church warden in 1550, 1551 and 1552. For some reason he had two seats in the church. He seems to have paid for the making of the parish butts in Southampton Street in 1544, for which the parish repaid him in instalments.'²



The jettied north wall of 17—19 London Street, with its timber framing surviving in good condition on all floors. (Photograph J.K. Major).

From another source we learn that as Mayor of Reading he received King Edward VI at Coley Cross at the start of a Royal visit to the town in 1552.³ He was buried in St. Lawrence's Church in 1576.

'The King's Majesty . . . came to Reading, at which time Thomas Aldworth, Mayor, accompanied by the substance of the inhabitants of the said town, as well Burgesses as others, in their best apparel, received his Grace (i.e. the King) at Coley Cross, all being on foot, where the said Mayor on his knee humbly welcomed His Grace and kissed the mace and delivered it to His Grace, who most gently stayed his horse and received it and immediately delivered the mace to the said Mayor. And also His Majesty further stayed his horse until the said Mayor had taken



Elegance in decay: A detail of one of the brackets which supported the jetty. (J.K. Major).

his horse and then the said Mayor . . . rode before the King's Majesty through the said town unto the King's palace (i.e. the Abbey, then in the hands of the Crown). At which time forasmuch as it was the first time of His Grace's coming the said Mayor presented and gave unto his Majesty two yokes of oxen . . .'

Between 1977 and 1980 a group of students attending a course on local history, sponsored jointly by Reading University and the Workers Education Association, under their tutor Mrs. Joan Dils, prepared a study, based on manuscript sources, of the town between 1540 and 1640.⁴ In the course of this study she discovered and transcribed the will of Alice Aldworth, widow of Thomas Aldworth of St. Giles Parish, Reading, made on 25th May 1586. This, printed in full as an appendix, is a fascinating document.

Of immediate interest is to be able to compare this will of the widow of a prominent citizen of the town with the house which can be clearly identified. The rooms it lists are:-

Kitchen	The old hall
Brewing house	The Gallery
Milk house	Great chamber
Boulting house	Green chamber
Parlour	Bride chamber
Hall	Maiden's chamber
	(see appendix)

Some at least of these can be tentatively placed with the help of the drawings of the house.

The house, five bays long, three storeys high, above a partial cellar, contained therefore some eight principal rooms. It was a well built timber framed structure with floors 8' 0" high. By the end of the Second World War it was outwardly totally disguised. Although the first floor jetty was recognisable the outer face was covered in black weather boarding, the roof had been partly raised, standard metal casements fitted for windows. The house which mainly concerns us, No. 17, lay behind a slightly later timber framed house on the street frontage. This was far more altered and cut about by conversion to a shop by the addition of georgian slate roof and upper storey bay windows. The entry to Thomas Aldworth's house behind was clearly through a covered entrance at the north end of the street frontage. So when Derek Sherborn made his list⁵ of buildings in the town, on which the first statutory list was based they appeared only as: "Nos. 17, 19. Mainly late 18th-century at the front. The rear of the house and the range of houses at the back are of early 17th-century half timbering, the latter being jettied at first floor level." They figured therefore only in the Supplementary List of 22 March 1957 (As No. 2/200).

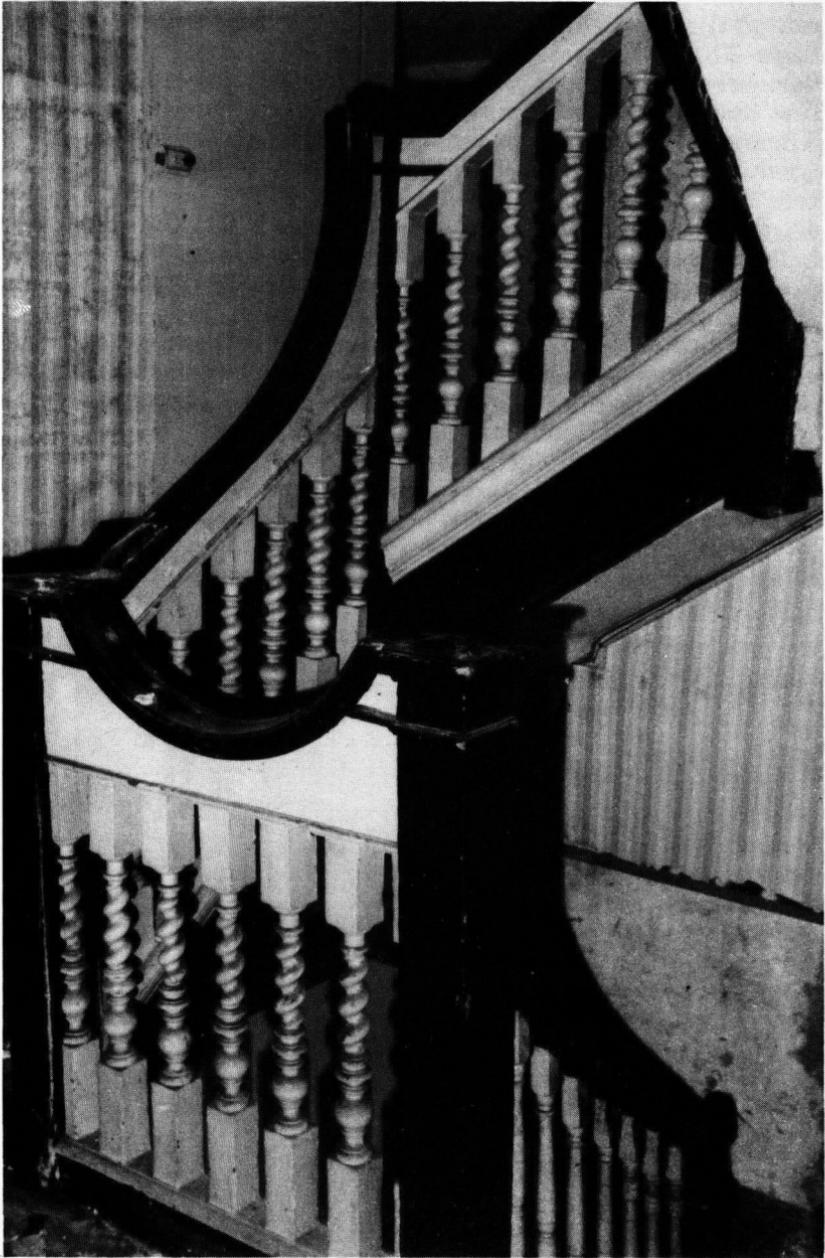
The following description is based on a study of the more

important house made in 1776. The five bays in the length were uniformly 15' 6" with a brick cellar extending only under four bays. The cellar was approximately 6' 6" in height, measured below the main beams. The ground floor was just under and the first floor just over 8' 0" in height, measured from floor to floor. The eaves of the storey in the roof was 3' 6" above the floor, with height of 8' 0" to the underside of the collar beams of the main roof frames. In width the cellar was 16' 3", the ground floor 17' 4", the first floor 18' 9" and the top floor 19' 0". The south wall had apparently, as is common with timber frames, decayed and been entirely replaced with brick, mostly of 18th and 19th century date, with some bonding timbers built into 9" and 13½" work. All the main timbers of the north (jettied) wall survived in good condition and all the floors. Only one bay of the roof had been reduced to a lean-to. The remaining four had been altered by having brick pillars built on the northern wall plate, carrying an upper eaves plate and modern light roof rafters at a shallower pitch than the original, and corresponding ties to anchor the new rafters to original rafters surviving on the southern slope.

No original windows or doors survived although the evidence of a rebated moulding to each central upper panel of three in the



Old and new roof structures at 17—19 London Street. The steep pitch of the original roof is apparent, its structure hidden behind a modern roof supported by brick pillars. (J.K. Major).



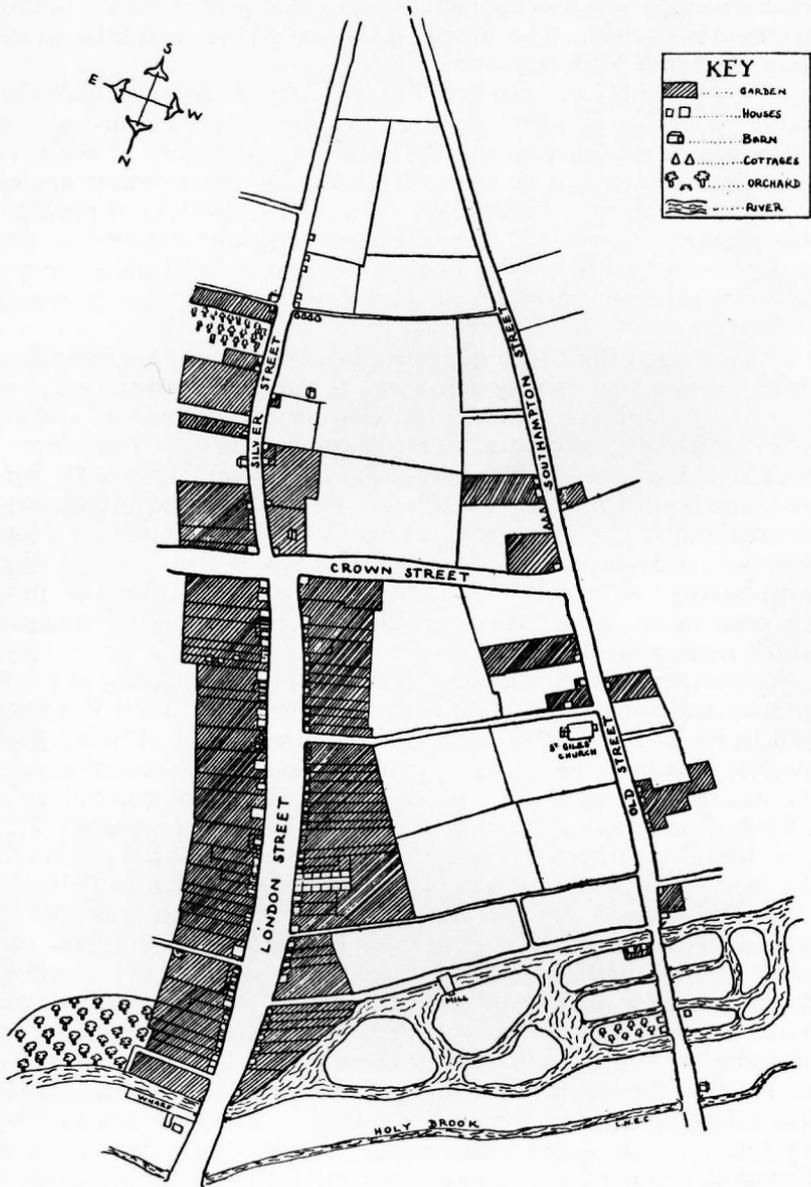
The staircase. This was outside the main framed area of building and linked 17 to 19 London Street. (J.K. Major).

width of each first floor bay suggested a regular spacing on that floor. The traces on the ground floor, and the spacing of intermediate studs was less regular. Three chimney breasts in Tudor brickwork survived. The lime mortar was reduced to little more than dry sand. Fireplace openings had timber lintels.

The framing was studied in detail, and in particular the joints. These produced nothing extraordinary, but are worth recording as evidence of the skill and craftsmanship of the carpenters. In particular it is worth noting how these joints are so devised that the erection of successive elements locks in position the previous elements. A particularly elegant instance is the sequence—ground floor wall-post—bracket—wall-plate—cross girt—bressummer—upper wall-post (securing the two previous members).

The second floor is of good height and the roof frames allow clear openings of nearly ten feet. A similar construction has recently been observed in an 18th-century coach house at Theale (with iron bolts) and in a pair of farm cottages at Peasemore, both in Berkshire. Curved posts, slightly resembling crucks, run from the floor up to the collar beam. At half their height 9" cross ties run out to the eaves plate to which they are jointed by a lap dovetail, with the jowl at the head of the wall post beneath that joint having two tenons, one into the wall plate and the other into the cross tie so, again, neatly securing together the three timbers which meet at a single point.

It remains only to conclude the story of this building of good quality and unusually documented. From about 1960 Reading had in its Town Map an Inner Distribution Road of which one quarter was built before the change of local government under the Act of 1974 transferred Planning and Highways matters from County Boroughs to the new Counties. This site, having already been purchased because it lay in the line of the road, passed to the new authority and the buildings were demolished in 1976. In 1980 the scheme for the completion of the road was finally abandoned. The story is typical of Reading. In the 1930's the town demolished the Yield Hall, its seventeenth century Guildhall, for a road never built; the site is now a multi-storey car park. In the same period was demolished Caversham Court, a seventeenth century half-timber house by the Thames which was at one time the home of Thomas Loveday,⁶ the antiquary, and was later remodelled by A.W.N. Pugin. This was also in the interest of a road never built. Finally in connection with the same abandoned Inner Distribution Road the Corporation demolished No. 22 The Forbury, the Queen Anne period Manor House of Reading which stood on part of the Abbey site. The site is marked by a large gap in the Prudential Assurance office designed to receive dual carriageways.



Street Map of the Inner Parish of St. Giles in 1552 from Harman's *The Parish of St. Giles-in-Reading*.

References

1. *Murray's Berkshire Architectural Guide*, 1949, p. 138.
2. L. Harman, *The Parish of St. Giles-in-Reading*, 1946, p. 20.
3. The 'Diary' or the Guild of Reading, quoted in Michael Hinton *A History of the Town of Reading* (Harrap, 1954).
4. Joan Dils and others: *Redding 1540—1640* (Extramural Department, School of Education, London Road, Reading).
5. Derek Sherborn: *List of Buildings of Architectural and Historic Interest in Reading* (in Reading Public Library).
6. Sarah Markham and H. Godwin Arnold: *A History of Caversham Court* (Gazabo Trustees and Reading Civic Society).

Appendix

Probate Inventory of Alice Aldworth, widow of Thomas Aldworth of St. Giles Parish, Reading. Made 25 May 1586.

In the Kitchen

a table with a frame and one form 2 stools at	2s. 6d.
a little furnace at	26s. 8d.
a chayres at	8d.
3 chopping stools at	12d.
3 shelves at	10d.
a pair of andirons	4s. 22
a pair of little dogs	16d.
a fire shovel and a pair of tongs	8d.
3 racks of Iron	12d.
a bucket with a Iron chain	20d.
a green sauce mortar	4d.
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	40s. 8d.

In the brewing house

a mash vat and a 'color' at	12s.
a kever at	12d.
a 'trosse' and a 'tonell'	12d.
3 brass pots at	12s.
3 bottles at	12s.
a chafing dish at	10d.
2 dripping pans	2s. 10d.
2 posnets at	3s.
4 pans at	12s.
a frying pan a mortar and a pestle	20d.
a table and 2 trestles	8d.
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	54s. 8d.

In the milk house

a cheese press and 4 vats	3s.
a powdering tub and a vat	3s.
a butter churn and a still	6s. 8d.
a table with one trestle	16d.
a cupboard with hair	2s.
5 spits or broaches	4s.
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	20s.

In the boulting house

a boulting wich, 2 vats	2s.
2 kevers, an Iron prong and one Iron pele	20d.
a trough with a cover	3s.
a table and a bench	12d.
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	7s. 8d.

In the parlour

a round table with a frame	6s.
6 joined stools at	12s.
6 cushions of tapestry	4s.
4 little stools of silk	2s. 8d.
a story with a silk curtain	5s.
a pair of andirons with fire shovel and tongs	10s.
a pair of cast andirons	3s. 4d.
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	33s.

In the hall

a candlestick of plate	12d.
a table and a frame at	8s.
a cupboard carved at	13s. 4d.
6 turkey cushions at	8s.
painted cloths at	5s.
3 pictures at	3s.
a chayre at	15d.
a carpet of tapestry	6s. 8d.
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	46s. 4d.

In the old hall

a table and 2 trestles at	2s.
painted cloths at	3s. 4d.
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	5s. 4d.

In the gallery

2 great chest at	2s. 6d.
a press of wainscot	6s. 8d.
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	9s. 2d.

In the great chamber

a joined bedstead at	20s.
2 feather beds 2 bolsters	53s. 4d.
a coverlet of tapestry at	20s.
curtains of say and valence	12s.
2 chests in the chamber	8s.
hangings of green with a story	16s.
a green carpet at	2s. 8d.
a turkey carpet at	£3
a silk quilt at	13s. 4d.
a flock bed and a bolster	10s.
one blanket at	2s.
one coverlet at	13s. 4d.
4 pillowbears at	10s.
one square table 2 cushions	3s. 4d.

In the green chamber

one bedstead at	8s.
a round table at	2s. 6d.
hangings of green	2s. 6d.
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	13s.

In the bride chamber

a joined bedstead at	26s. 8d.
a flock bed at	5s.
a feather bed at	26s. 8d.
2 bolsters at	8s.
a pair of blankets	5s.
a coverlet of tapestry at	6s. 8d.
curtains and valance of say	13s. 4d.
a truckle bed at	2s.
a feather bed at	5s.
a pair of blankets	5s.
a coverlet of list	3s. 4d.
2 feather bolsters at	5s.
a count table at	4s.

a counter and 2 chests at	5s.
a chair and 2 stools	2s. 6d.
green hangings with a story	13s. 4d.
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	£1.16s. 6d.

In the maiden's chamber

a bedstead at	4s.
2 flockbeds at	8s.
one blanket at	2s.
a coverlet of list	2s.
2 bolsters at	5s.
curtains and valance of silk	4s.
a press and a table at	2s. 6d.
3 chests at	10s.
2 pillowbears of feathers	2s.
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	40s.

In Pewter

4 great chargers	10s.
2 dozen of platters at	36s.
2 dozen half of pottingers	18s.
3 dozen and half of great and small saucers at	17s.
12 candlesticks at	16s.
3 plates at	2s. 6d.
one ewer and a basin at	3s. 4d.
half a dozen chamber pots	4s.
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	£5.6s.10d.

In Plate

2 double goblets gilt	£12
one nest of double gilt bowls wrought at	£10
one silver salt double gilt	50s.
one dozen of silver spoons gilt with caps at	£ 4
one silver salt parcel gilt	33s. 4d.
9 silver spoons at	40s.
one silver pot at	40s.
2 stone jugs with covers of silver at	5s.
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	£34.8s. 4d.

In Napery

12 pair of sheets at	£3. 10s.
6 pillowbears at	15s.
5 table cloths at	16s.
one dozen damask napkins	20s.
one dozen diaper napkins	33s. 4d.
one dozen plain napkins	6s.
one damask table cloth at	16s. 8d.
6 towels at	10s.

£8. 17s.

The inventory also records cattle and horses, crops, leases and credits. Total value: £188.5s.

Transcribed by Mrs. Joan Dils (Reading Local History Society).