

# Suffolk Institute of Archæology and Natural History.

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## NOTES ON BURY CORNER POSTS.

Some years ago I published a brochure on the Corner Posts of Ipswich, and since that time I have been adding to my collection examples from various places in East Anglia.

I have made a special study of those at Bury St. Edmunds, which comprise some of the finest and most interesting in the county, as well as being from an archæological point of view some of the earliest to be found anywhere. Houses of the 15th century and 16th century are very plentiful in the town, and though many have disappeared, a number still remain to tell us of its former grandeur. In my book to which I have referred, I gave a description of the construction of timber framed buildings generally, so I do not propose to go over the ground again except in a general way, especially as space is of considerable object, and the drawings more or less fully explain themselves.

Moxon, an early writer on House Carpentry, has thus described principal posts. He says, "They are corner posts of a carcass, that is to say the skeleton of a house before it is lathed and plastered."

A reference to Plate I will show exactly the part that was played by these posts, and the method of their construction, and how they were framed into the adjacent parts of the building. Briefly recapitulating what I have explained with regard to the

Ipswich examples, I may say that the principal use of the corner post was to carry the angle of a building where it came at the junction of two streets, or where it was isolated on two sides.

It not only had to carry great weights, but by its adoption it was possible to carry out the overhang on both of the exposed faces.

It was framed at the bottom into the cill piece which was laid upon a rubble foundation, and where the cill piece was morticed and tenoned at the angle, the foot of the post was let into these cill pieces, thus preventing the post from shifting at the base. The head of the post was tenoned into the head pieces and pinned into it (see Plate 3), and this plate also shows the large tenon at the top of the post which was framed and pinned into the angle beam, and thus it was impossible to move the post at the head. The angle beam ran out over the bracket of the post and was framed and pinned into the secondary beam of the floor which was in its turn framed into the main floor beam. The floor joists were framed into the secondary beam, and where the angle beam commenced the floor joists were framed into it at right angles to the two external faces. Where the joists next the posts were short and had no wall support, carved pilasters with brackets springing from them were inserted underneath. Thus it will be seen that the construction was a solid mass firmly connected together that nothing could move so long as the tenons and pins held. The doors and windows were all framed in as part of the structure and not as now inserted afterwards.

If you examine the mediæval buildings of any particular locality, you will find that the materials

used, and the design and decoration employed, were controlled and influenced by surrounding conditions.

The early builders used in the construction of their buildings those materials that lay closest to their hands, transport being difficult, and in some cases impossible, and this accounts for the fact that oak was so largely employed in this part of the country, the greater part of which was densely covered with forests traversed here and there by trackways and roads, originally made by wild or semi-wild animals in their passage through the woods in search of food.

As the population increased, areas had to be cleared, and these vast thickets melted away with the beasts that inhabited them, and in their place towns arose exhibiting rows of stately and regular houses, and people moved in the sweet security of streets.

From the Norman to the Tudor periods the decoration of domestic buildings followed the ornamentation used in ecclesiastical edifices, tracery, cresting, battlementing, interspersed with angels, religious scenes, and latterly grotesques, coats of arms, and merchants' marks. Construction was ornamented where possible, but the early builders did not construct ornament uselessly.

The Corner Post offered a splendid opportunity for enrichment, and being at the angle of two streets the passer-by could not fail to observe it. Every thing had a significance, nothing was done without reason, and these sculptured embellishments conveyed a deep meaning to the people at a period when few could read and fewer still could write.

Whilst the forms and decorations of the more

elaborate and notable buildings have been recorded and handed down beyond their actual duration by faithful representations in pen, pencil and colour, many of the humbler buildings are daily sinking into oblivion partly by reason of the decay of the materials of which they are constructed, but chiefly for a desire for what is thought to be fashionable, and new, which grows in proportion to the increased wealth of the inhabitants, or from the necessities of trades and manufactures, the carrying on of which can be done with greater convenience in more up-to-date structures.

The design of the Ancient Domestic Architecture followed the lines of ecclesiastical ornamentation, but it will be noticed that the tracery and decoration occurs in domestic buildings at a much later period than the original design itself. In other words, Gothic details of the 14th century were repeated in the 15th, 16th, and even in the 17th centuries in domestic buildings.

In the life of the people of the middle ages, religious signs and symbols held a prominent place in their carvings and decorations, in their merchants' marks, and in almost every phase of their daily lives, and to the present day we have a survival in as much as an illiterate man makes a cross to the sign of the name he cannot write. I mention these few details to show that the date of a domestic building cannot always be accurately determined by its ornament.

In both construction and ornament all knowledge was traditional. The information as to the secrets of his work was conveyed orally from the master to his apprentice, who if he were a gifted learner suggested in his work improvement or better methods

for meeting the growing necessities of the period. Again the influence of foreign emigrants who fled from persecution abroad and settled in East Anglia as merchants and weavers could not fail to leave its mark in the carving, and it is possible to trace this influence in East Anglia even though the work was carried out by English artificers.

These early builders used only English oak, and were very prodigal in their sizes, but they lost a great deal of the strength of their timbers by the numerous mortice holes that they cut on which they relied for the cohesion of their buildings. Even in their corner posts, which to the casual observer appear to be massive, half their supporting value was lost because on the inside the wood was all cut away to fit the size or square of the room (see Plates 1 and 3). Oak being plentiful, size was of no moment, though as time went on and oak became scarcer, their scientific methods improved so that with timbers of reduced size an equal rate of strength was maintained. No nails were used, everything was pinned with oak pins. The projection of the overhanging floors varied very much, and the earlier the examples the greater would be the overhang. This gradually got less as time went on, and where you find in the 14th and 15th centuries overhang of 2' 6", in the 17th century it got reduced to 9" or 10".

The width of the projection of the upper floors therefore gives us an indication of the period of erection. These early buildings seldom consisted of more than two storeys, with rooms in the roof, but where they exceeded this, a second post appeared on the upper floor, but of smaller dimensions. The reason for this overhanging which is such a delight to the artistic mind by reason of the fine shadows that it

gives, was mainly due to a desire on the part of the early builder to protect the lower floors of the building, because the clay filling between the oak uprights was of a very perishable nature. It also had the advantage of affording protection to the passers-by, and also of increasing the accommodation of the upper storeys, a valuable asset in the narrow streets of walled towns where space was very limited.

In high buildings in large towns where the storeys were numerous, it was possible for persons in the garrets to almost shake hands across the street.

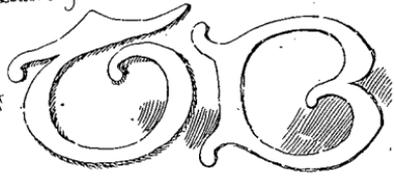
With regard to the decoration of these posts, let us first take Plate 1 from an example at Bury.

This house, situated in Abbeygate Street, was evidently at one time a structure connected either with the Abbey or some religious foundation, and its internal decorations were elaborate (see Vol. 3, part 2, Suffolk Institute of Archæology, where the building is described by me). The corner post has a bracket with ornamented spandrels, and below the bracket the cap has on one face a fabulous animal symbolical of the lusts of the flesh, with a figure astride of it representing Vanity. Behind the creature stands a man attired in a long flowing robe with a knotted girdle called a discipline round his waist. On the other face is the mutilated figure of a man playing on an organ with pipes.

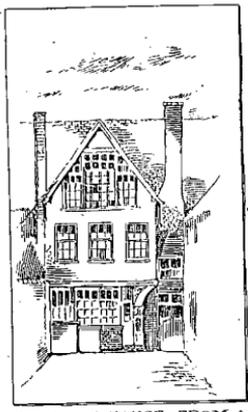
On Plate 3 an exactly similar allegory is represented, but behind the fabulous creature is a man attired as a courtier. This fragment is in the possession of Mr. Hunter, wine merchant, of Abbeygate Street, and came from a house formerly in Cooks Row. Plate 2 shows one of the largest and most

BURY ST EDMUNDS Plate 1 Letters from an Old Beam inside the house

OLD  
CORNER  
POST

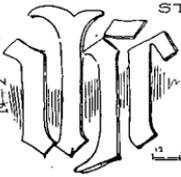


ENLARGED  
VIEW OF HEAD

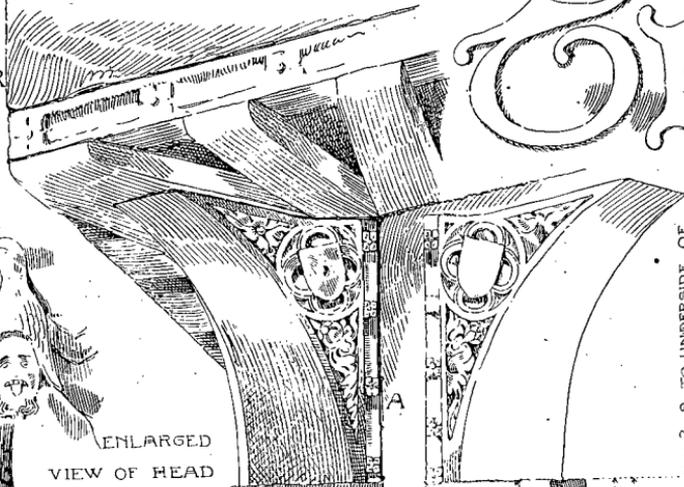


VIEW OF HOUSE FROM A  
YARD OUT OF ABBEYGATE  
STREET

LETTERS  
FROM A  
BEAM IN  
HOUSE



MEASURED AND DRAWN BY JOHN S CORDER

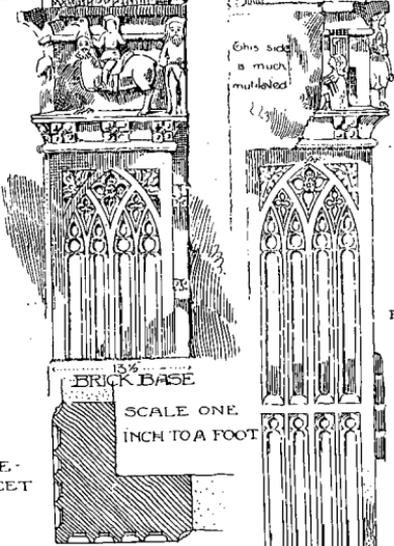


2. 9 TO UNDERSIDE OF  
JOISTS



SPANDRIL  
A ENLARGED

JOIST TENON



BRICK BASE

SCALE ONE  
INCH TO A FOOT

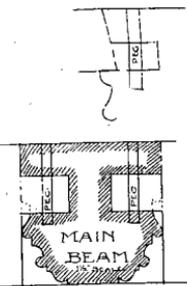
PLAN OF POST

OVERHANG ABT 1 9

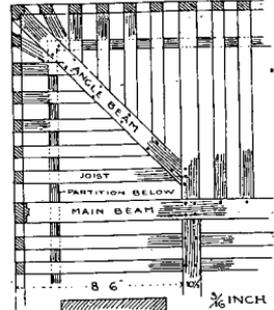
12 9 6 3 0  
feet

On this side  
is much  
mutilated

7 2 TO PAVEMENT LINE



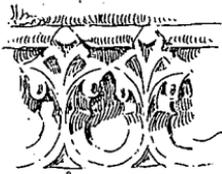
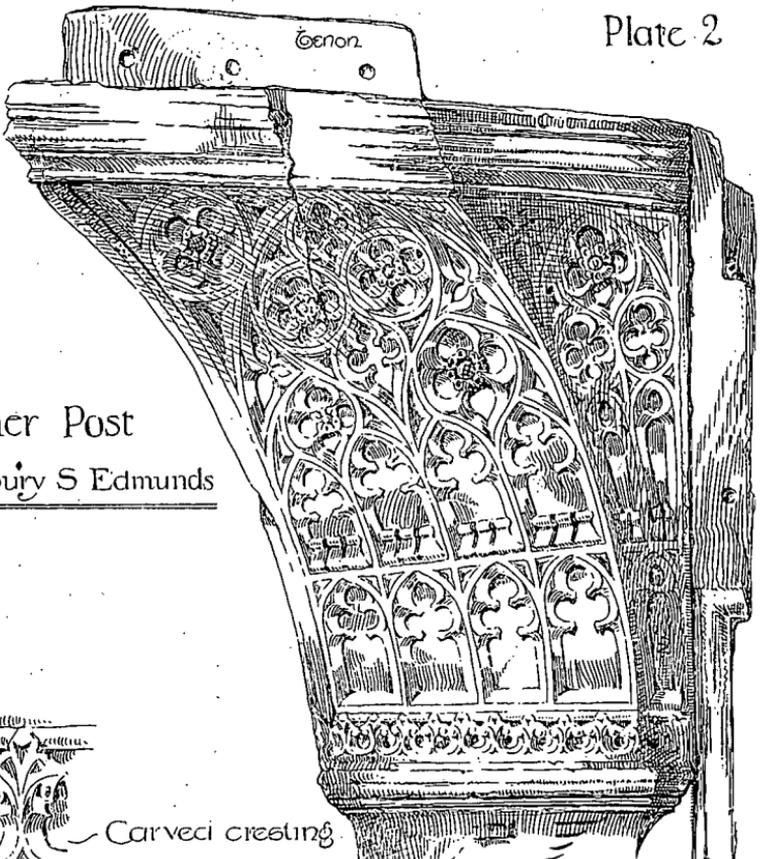
PLAN OF JOISTS AND BEAMS



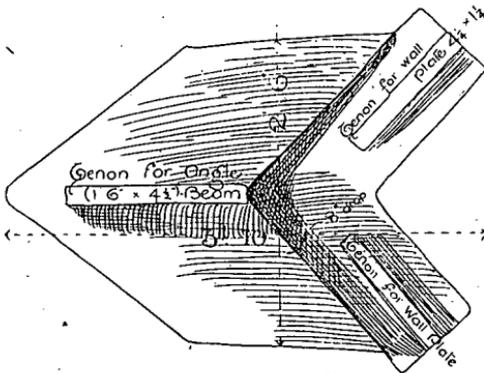
JOIST  
1 1/2 INCH  
TO A FOOT

12 TO PAVEMENT LINE

An old  
Oak Corner Post  
from Bury S Edmunds



Carved cresting



HEIGHT OF CAP 3' 7"  
1' 9"

*John S Gardner  
January 1891*

Plan of Top of Cap 1 to a foot

# Corner Posts

from  
Bury St. Edmunds  
Suffolk

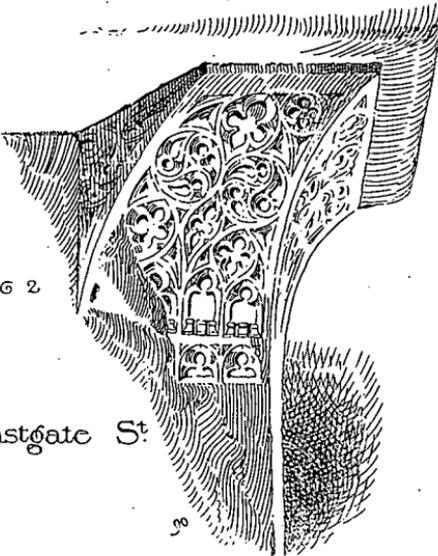
FIG 1



formerly in  
Cooks Row

9

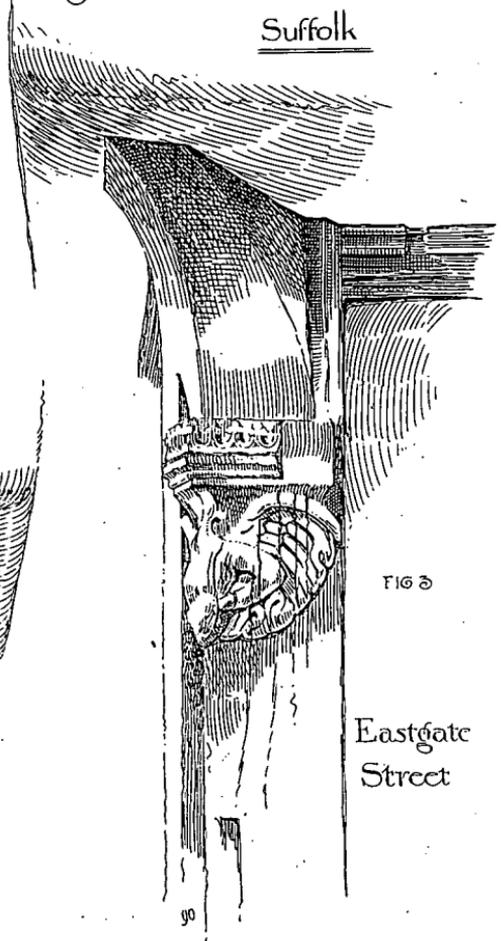
FIG 2



Eastgate St.

8

FIG 3



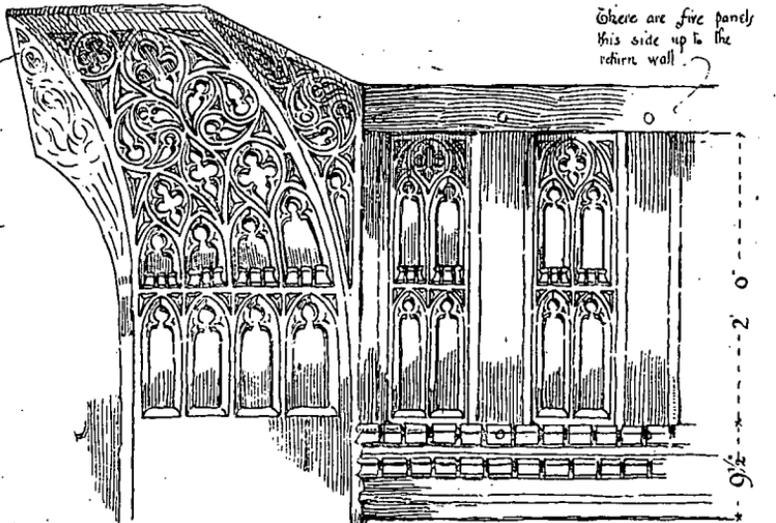
Eastgate  
Street

90

John S. Corder: del<sup>ts</sup>

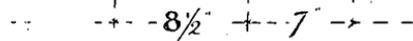


*Old House Eastgate  
Dury S. Edmunds.  
John S. Corcoran.*



The Corner Post  
showing paneled  
framing at side

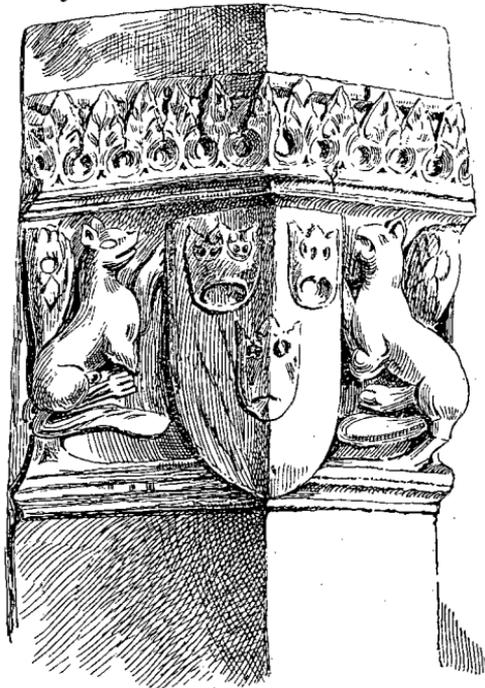
Plan of Framing



Corner Post Moyses Hall

Bury S. Edmunds

Fig. 1.



HEIGHT OF CAP  $15\frac{1}{2}$   
 TOTAL WIDTH  $18\frac{1}{2}$   
 SHIELD  $10 \cdot 7$   
 SIDES  $9\frac{1}{2}$  &  $10$   
 OBTUSE ANGLE

From Corner Post 56 Abbeygate Plate 5

Bury S. Edmunds

Fig. 2



HEIGHT OF FIGURES  $2 \cdot 0$   
 WIDTH  $6\frac{1}{2}$  inches.

DATE 1514

John S. Carter  
1908

magnificent posts I have ever seen. It is now in South Kensington Museum. The bracket is covered with intricate tracery, and there are indications below the bracket of an angel with outspread wings, a very common feature. Apart from its colossal dimensions it is a marvellous piece of work, and must have been cut from an enormous tree, the dimensions being: height of cap 3' 7", square of stem 1' 9", and the oak tree it was cut from could not have been less than 14 feet circumference, it being one solid piece. Plate 3 has three posts I have already referred to from Cooks Row, and two from the East Gate. The smaller one from Mr. Hooper's tannery is a simple design with a figure of St. Michael upon it below the cap. The other from a house opposite the Abbots Bridge is much more ornate, but mutilated in the stem. The house was at one time connected with the Abbey, and there are evidences that it was at one time approached from it by an access over the road. On Plate 4 I have shown how the panelled woodwork was carried under the overhang in continuation of the ornament and the bracket of the post, showing it to be a house of more than ordinary importance. Plate 5 shows a cap presented to Moyses Hall in 1842. On its two faces it has the arms of Bury, the three crowns on a shield with supporters of two wolves, and behind each wolf is a tree indicating the wood in which the head of St. Edmund was found. A curious feature about this post is that it was not at a right angle corner, but the house had a very obtuse bend. The post is early 15th century.

In Moyses Hall there is also a fine angle beam end with a carving of the Deity upon it. On the same plate are two figures in canopies from a post now built up in a chemist's shop in Abbeygate Street—early 16th century. The external wall on the ground

floor has been built up in line with the overhang so that the post is right inside the shop. The figures appear to represent Henry VIII., and one of his wives and the date of the house is 1514 or thereabouts.

Plate 6 is from the old Bell in Guildhall Street, and is in the possession of G. Milner Gibson Cullum, Esq., of Hardwick House. It is a beautiful example of 15th century or even earlier. On the bracket is an angel with outspread wings bearing a scroll, and below on one face are two crowned winged figures supporting a shield with a bell surmounted by a crown.

Plate 7 shows an old post *in situ* attached to a house, since pulled down, in Guildhall Street. It is a very early post of simple design, but the buildings are very picturesque in grouping.

Plate 8 shows two posts from a house in Bury St. Edmunds, now demolished, late Henry VIII period. They are now in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

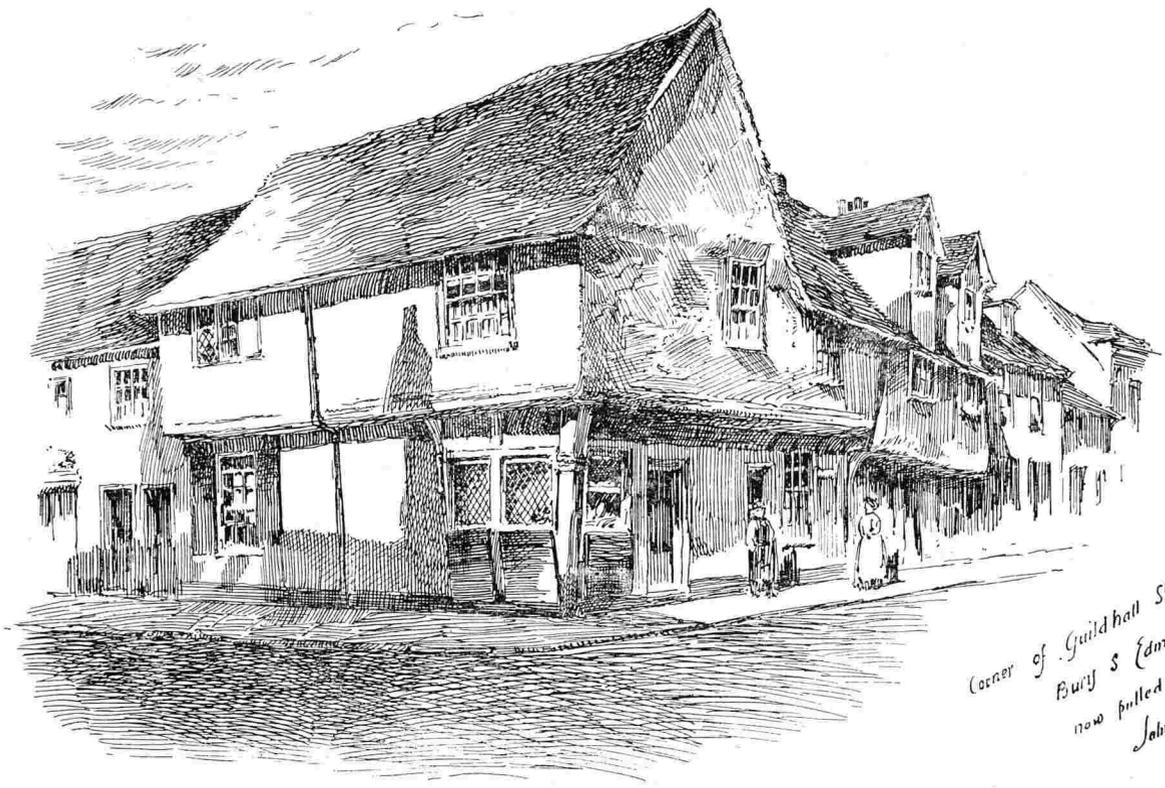
Fig. 1 bears the arms first of Catherine Cotton, wife of Thomas Heigham Cambs, who died 1492, and second Elizabeth Calthorp, who died 1540, first wife of Thomas Heigham, of Bury St. Edmunds. Fig. 2 shews first the arms of Thomas Heigham, of Bury St. Edmunds, combined with his two wives, Calthorp and Poley, and second those of Thomas Heigham alone.

Bury St. Edmunds has suffered less than many towns from the demolition of its ancient buildings, though many Tudor houses have been re-fronted in the Georgian style, and it is only by a careful inspection of the interiors and the general outline of the roofs, which in early times were of lofty pitch, that their real date can be established.



Plate 6.

OLD BELL INN, BURY ST. EDMUNDS.



Corner of Guild hall St  
Bury & Cammels  
now pulled down  
John S. Carter

Plate. 8.

Two Corner  
Posts  
from a House  
Bury S Edmunds  
*now demolished*

Fig 1



W. 6 - 1909

Fig 2.



W. 7 - 1909



Plate 9.

HOUSE, EASTGATE, BURY ST. EDMUNDS. J. S. CORDER, del.

It is very noticeable in many of the 16th century houses that Bury Abbey was a happy hunting ground for builders of that period for materials.

Tons of stone and rubble that must have come from the Abbey were incorporated in structures of that date, and for this reason where the work was of ornamental character a stranger might be easily misled as to the real age of a building that contains these pillaged fragments.

It is much to be regretted that more is not known concerning the houses to which these Bury posts belonged, but information regarding them is very scanty and has been to a great extent lost, especially as regards those buildings which have disappeared and of which the post is the sole surviving fragment. So far as I know I have shown all the posts of importance that are known to exist in connection with the town, and taken altogether they form a very interesting collection.

The Frontispiece represents the Abbots Bridge in the Eastgate, Bury St. Edmunds, which was erected during the first half of the 13th Century, and is situated opposite the house shewn on Plate 4.

JOHN SHEWELL CORDER.