



THE SPAB MAGAZINE

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Plymouth's Elizabethan House

THE SMART OLD HOUSE
Embracing new technology
in a Grade II cottage

PUTNEY CEMETERY CHAPELS
Sustainable retrofit details at
Gothic Revival chapels

DRINKSTONE
An old Suffolk cottage
saved again

A PLYMOUTH MERCHANT HOUSE





Photo SPAB Archive



Photo Plymouth City Council Archive



Photo Josephine Collingwood

The Elizabethan House

A survival from the late 1500s when Plymouth was a thriving port, the Elizabethan House has endured early 1900s slum clearance and the Blitz. Vital structural and strengthening works were carried out as part of Plymouth's Mayflower 400 commemorations. Project architect and SPAB Scholar Izaak Hudson explains the SPAB's unique involvement in the building and some of the challenges of the project.

Left The newly-repaired Elizabethan House on New Street in the Barbican

Above The Elizabethan House before the 1920s restoration

Above right C1920s Elizabethan HouseC

Right After the repairs in 2021

NUMBER 32 NEW STREET (THE 'Elizabethan House') is an early post-medieval merchant's house in the historic Barbican port area of Plymouth, dating from the turn of the 17th century. The house has a main three-storey range to the street with a room on each floor; a passageway and rear staircase winding around a reused ship's mast; and a short projecting wing to the rear also of three storeys with a room per storey. The rear range was once much longer and extended the length of the terraced garden, but this was demolished in 1929.

There is a well-documented history of interesting owners and tenants from 1631 onwards, and the new interactive exhibition in the house tells the fascinating story of the building and these occupiers over the ages.

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Above Oak sole plate repairs and ducts for radon protection on site



Top Rotten window cill and frame members uncovered for repair



Above Pieced-in oak wall plate and chestnut ceiling laths

Of particular interest to the SPAB was the 1926-29 campaign to save the building from proposed demolition by the Plymouth Corporation, and the subsequent fundraising, which the SPAB was heavily involved with.

Housing conditions in the Barbican in the 1920s were squalid, and by 1926 the local borough engineer, John Wibberley, was eager to demolish and rebuild all the historic buildings on New Street to improve conditions. A local Devon architect, Arthur Slocome Parker, alerted the then-Secretary of the SPAB, AR Powys, to the published tender in the Western Morning News for the demolition of the Elizabethan House, and the Plymouth Corporation offered a stay to allow the SPAB to inspect. On Parker's advice the SPAB offered to pay for urgent structural shoring works, but Powys wrote to Parker to plead; "for the Lord's sake do it as cheaply as you can for we are overdrawn some £200". Powys visited the building in December 1926 and asked the architect William Weir to estimate the cost of repairs. Weir proposed that demolition of the rear range should proceed, as he believed it to be early 19th century (it was probably older). The SPAB, which as Powys had written, was in somewhat dire financial

straits at the time, launched a campaign to raise £1,200 to repair the building.

The SPAB managed to raise money from their wealthy society contacts, and there are some wonderful begging letters and replies from the great-and-good of 1920s society in the SPAB archives in Spital Square, and the Plymouth and West Devon Archive. The formidable local MP, Lady Astor, was particularly involved and donated £200, and promised to try hard to "screw more" from her husband. The then Prince of Wales gave £5.

Weir finally visited the house in January 1927 and wrote a specification for repairs. Work eventually commenced on site in the summer of 1929 under the direction of Parker. However, the Plymouth mayor, Ambrose Andrews, encountered some problems with local councillors over the work, and with so many out-of-work in Plymouth due to the Depression he had to agree to unemployed local men undertaking the repair work to the house. This meant the work wasn't done as sensitively as the SPAB would have wished. Parker was persuaded to forego his fees and complained to Powys in 1931 that "it fell to me to do practically the whole work, for which I charged not even pocket expenses".

Despite Parker's efforts Powys lamented

in a December 1931 letter to the architect Basil Oliver that Parker "is by nature a 'restorer', and I could not get him to consult Mr Weir... I tried to arrange that Mr Weir should be chiefly responsible, but local influence interfered and my schemes were scotched". While Arthur Parker might not have been able to undertake the work in accordance with the SPAB's philosophy, he helped save the building and he had to grapple with local politicians and untrained workmen. However, in Powys' defence photos of the building before the 'restoration' show that many of the windows and features became more 'Elizabethan' after the 1929 work.

The house opened as a museum after Parker's restoration and has been under the care of the local authority since (for a short period it was operated by the National Trust). The building was Grade II* listed in 1954.

Unfortunately, by 2015 the poor standard of repairs undertaken in 1929-30 could no longer be patched-over, and structural movement was close to the point of no return. The museum fit-out was in dire need of reinvigoration, and the solitary 1970s



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Above The new oak and Delabole slate rear extension



Photos Josephine Collingwood

Right Repairs to the leaning spine wall

toilet and lack of any other facilities or servicing (such as any heating), demanded a substantial repair and refurbishment project.

The 1929-30 repair works to the Elizabethan House caused similar problems as many other early-20th century repair projects. Timber frame buildings can stand a lot of foolhardy chopping about before they fall down, but the main issues with rescue projects from this period are that budgets were often very limited; newly emerging unsympathetic materials such as cement and hard plaster were used with abandon; the structural consequences of partial demolition were often not fully

considered; and underlying structural issues, frequently dating from the original construction or long-term decay since, were often patched-over rather than being properly addressed.

At the Elizabethan House, the lean of the central spine wall between the ranges caused by roof spread had reached a point where it would continue to lead out under its own weight without structural intervention. Of more serious consequence was the continual movement of the truncated rear range, and extensive water ingress though the slender rear wall (originally an internal partition). The rooms were quickly

cleared of their furniture and urgent structural propping was installed by the Council engineers which filled half of the rooms. This forced the building to close while funding was sought for permanent repairs. In 2017 the house was added to Historic England's Heritage at Risk register (being finally removed in 2020).

Initial analysis of the building with the project structural engineers, Fenton Holloway, showed that many of the issues could be resolved by careful intervention, such as fitch plates to beams, scarfed beam and joist ends to replace decay, internal ties within the walls, and steel strengthening plates. However, the condition of the slate-hung rear wall was of much greater concern. It was later discovered that many of the studs were only hanging from the slate battens and the wall had no footing at all, and extensive underpinning was required.

A proposal was developed for a two-storey extension to act as a buttress to the house and rear range oak roof trusses which were racking outwards. The extension would also house the new toilet, a meeting room and kitchen for museum staff, and plant and server rooms to service the new museum fit-out and particularly the intensive audio-visual installation. By housing all these services in the new slate and oak extension, the existing historic rooms all retain their original configuration.

Work on site was undertaken between June 2019 and February 2021 by the



Left Repointing and new capping of the garden walls in Plymouth limestone

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Above The top floor room following repairs

Right The same room after the exhibition fit out



Photos Josephine Collingwood

contractor Messenger BCR, overseen by the seasoned site manager John Hanmer, whose dulcet West Midlands tones provided even more character to the Barbican for many months. Storing materials near the site was a logistical challenge given that the narrow streets limited access, but this was eventually overcome by forming a small compound outside nearby businesses where the roads are wider.

As well as general repairs, conservation and refurbishment, some elements of the project involved quite specialist work, jointly led with James Mackintosh Architects. Several areas retain the original earth plaster and this was analysed and conserved wherever possible. The west wall of the house is masonry and internal surfaces of this wall were re-plastered with an earth mortar mix provided by Devon earth builder Kevin McCabe. Early 20th-century internal paint schemes uncovered by Lisa Oestreicher were returned where appropriate (the 1920s restoration removed practically all traces of original paint), and period-appropriate colour schemes were developed for other rooms to match the date themes of the museum fit-out. Leaded lights and timber frames were carefully repaired by Nick Beacham and the contractor's joiners. The swept valley Delabole slate roof was repaired and partially re-roofed by a skilled traditional slating team from Exeter Roofing.

The exhibition installation required an extensive amount of cabling, audio-visual infrastructure and lighting, and as ever this produced some challenges for such a tight and delicate timber frame structure. Ducting routes had to be very carefully coordinated, and the wiring as it leaves the old building into the extension

hardly leaves much room for space between the timber frame in places!

The exhibition designers asked for the main room on the top floor to be left in a partially completed state to reflect the exhibition design for the room detailing the building's construction. Again, this required some behind-the-scenes thought, such as installing black-painted boarding behind the laths to maintain separation through the ceiling. Although I was initially skeptical of leaving the ceiling unplastered, the variety of materials and light across them now makes this one of my favourite rooms in the building.

There was a very exciting moment on site when a corbel was released from the front elevation window to reveal a date of 1619 carved into it (dendrochronological investigation was unable to pinpoint the exact date of construction of the house). Unfortunately, further investigation revealed that this was re-used from a building in Kinterbury Street demolished in the 1920s!

The project did throw up some challenges on site; more timber decay than anticipated was uncovered behind walls that just couldn't all be opened-up beforehand. After Covid restrictions were applied in the Spring of 2020 there was a limit to the number of workers than could be in the same areas together, which inevitably slowed-up work in such confined rooms. Dampness levels in the west wall initially fell but then unexpectedly rose as the project neared completion, complicated by the internal earth plaster which as well as being intentionally 'breathable' also starting to act as a poultice and draw

moisture out of the core of the wall. Remedial work was undertaken to slate hang the chimneys to try and reduce the effect of penetrating rainwater which was struggling to get out of the massive west wall, which is riddled with flues serving the numerous former fireplaces. Originally these fires would have helped dry the wall and provide ventilation, but now they probably help track moisture into the wall core. Infilling them would have been an unacceptable level of intervention, and open fires in inner-city Plymouth are probably gone now forever.

To cap it all, hatchlings of protected (and very aggressive) herring gulls on an adjacent roof moved onto the scaffold onto the scaffold and delayed works until they were fully fledged. The client was exceptionally patient, and diligent work by the contractor mitigated delays as much as possible, but for a while the project team were concerned the old building was just refusing to accept that the loving attention of the contractor team would have to end!

After the exhibition fit-out phase by The Hub and Hot Rod exhibition designers, the building re-opened to the public in July 2021, and voices from the past are once more reanimating the old house.

The Elizabethan House project was led by Destination Plymouth and Plymouth City Council working with specialist heritage architects Dittrich Hudson Vasetti and James Mackintosh Architects. Work was funded by Plymouth City Council, Mayflower 400, the National Lottery Heritage Fund, the Coastal Revival Fund, Historic England and The Pilgrim Trust.