THE REFRONTED BUILDINGS OF READING

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MMXXV

Being an article on refronted buildings, their history, identification and some examples in Reading.

INTRODUCTION

I am walking along London Street, and I notice a squat little building with a rather unremarkable façade: 105 London Street. The whitewashed brick frontage is clearly of no antiquity, yet, on entering the shop and looking about me, it is evident that this is a building of great age. Thick beams run across the ceiling. At the latest this is 17th century, but judging by the thickness of the beams, it may be much older. The reason for this discrepancy is refronting; the custom of giving an old timber framed house a new, more fashionable facade, predominantly in the 18th and 19th centuries. It was the cheaper way to rebuild your house to the aesthetic requirements of the time.

It may seem that very few timber-framed buildings in Reading survive. Actually, the ones with original facades are just the tip of the iceberg; the vast majority of these houses hide behind later facades.

So, for people interested in domestic buildings, this is quite the complication. And, arguably, it adds much more interest to this subject, for it is part of the variety which makes vernacular architecture so compelling.

Any building of great age is a compilation of the many eras which it has lived through.

To illustrate this idea is the example of 39 London Street.

Outwardly a Georgian townhouse, the passage walls leading to Sims Court are timber-framed (meaning the building is possibly earlier or that reused timbers were employed in its construction) and stones from Reading Abbey have been found in a wall between it and number 37.

Often, a building which appears Tudor, for example, and has all the stereotypical characteristics of that era, is in fact bogus, or dramatically altered.

A good example of the latter is the old Hospitium in St Laurence's churchyard. It appears decidedly mediaeval, with its two-light tracery windows. However, much of this is the work of the Victorian architect Slingsby Stallwood who restored the Hospitium for the university in the 1890s. Before the restoration, the Hospitium was very different. Though it was a mediaeval building, many of the windows were Georgian sashes and it had been much altered in post-mediaeval times. What Slingsby Stallwood did was to remove much of the interest of the building, meaning that now, for the most part it is mediaeval and Victorian, rather than the rich variety of ages which would be natural to a building of its antiquity.

Left: The Hospitium before restoration, seen in the 1880s

I have found no books dedicated to this subject. This is surprising given the impact refronting has had on English towns. In fact, only recently have domestic buildings in towns begun to be studied.

There have been several problems which have threatened or failed to protect many of the buildings in question (see my list). I shall list a few.

Listing, in concept, is meant to stop destruction of heritage. There are a number of problems with it. When buildings were being listed in the 20th century, certain types of buildings got more protection, such as the ones which followed the classical rules of architecture, while some very important domestic buildings did not get the protection they deserved. Some entries say 'included for group value' about a building, which is rather diminishing. Thankfully, this is changing.

Some historic buildings were not listed at all. Our previous example of 105 London Street, a refronted building, is still not listed, possibly because the person in charge of drawing up the list was ignorant of its age. Strangely, the man who drew up the first list for Reading, Derek Sherborn, did include number 105 in his list and 43 London Street, another refronted building, lately demolished which was not listed at the time of demolition.

Another strange thing about listing is the fact that many buildings are still listed though they are long gone, an example of this being 69 London Street, a possibly refronted building destroyed in 1998.

Number 69 (the white building with missing roof) before redevelopment, c 2000. It collapsed in 1998, leaving only the half-timber gable on the left standing.

Though listing has its problems, it is arguably the planning authorities who have done the most damage. They have consented to all the schemes which have done their best to destroy Reading town centre: the IDR, demolition of Pageant House, Finches' Buildings to name a few prominent examples.

Later, in my list of refronted buildings in Reading, former and current, the number of refronted buildings lately demolished shall become apparent (a surprising amount).

Here is an example of how a building of considerable value can be lost in these times:

Step 1- It is listed (probably in the mid-late 20th century).

Step 2- Council gives permission for significant alterations, causing the building to lose much of its historic fabric, e.g. taking out original staircase, rebuilding all but facade.

Step 3- It is delisted due to the fact it is basically Trigger's broom.

Step 4- Council gives permission for demolition.

An example of this, though the fourth step has not been completed yet, but will imminently, is 39 Friar Street.

PART ONE: ON THE HISTORY OF REFRONTING.

First, it should be mentioned that in this article, I am talking about refronting in towns when a new frontage was given to a timber framed building in the post-mediaeval period, a very particular subject.

Refronting began to be a common technique when the neat boxes of houses started to appear, which we call Georgian. This was a gradual process which evolved through the 17th and 18th centuries, influenced by the increasing affordability of brick, the fashion for classical architecture and the Great Fire of London and its wider influence (more on this later). It was also influenced by the shortage of timber for building which became a problem, in some areas more than others, in the 17th century. For many in the 18th century, when refronting was at its peak, it would not have made sense to rebuild their property in the new style, for instance if they were too poor, or if they felt their house already met their requirements. In these cases, refronting would have been preferable due to its relative cheapness and the fact that it retained all but the facade.

Alternatives to refronting included the very general technique of plastering over a facade and tile-hanging a house, which happened in the Wield. In the South-east, many timber-framed houses were refronted with mathematical tiles to give the appearance of brickwork. The tiles were attached to the timbers.

Arguably, the Great Fire of London had an influence on both the new Georgian style, whose principals involved building with brick or stone and abandoning the previous vernacular style, and refronting. Walter G Bell's book on that fire covers these details expertly. After the fire, jettying was banned in London and it was against the law to have a wooden frontage on a building (Act for the Rebuilding of the City of London, 1667). This led to a massive increase in refronting in London, which may have helped to set the fashion for other parts of the country.

In terms of refronting of domestic buildings regionally, it should be noted that it can be seen in places where timber-framing only died out in post-mediaeval times. Therefore, refronting can be seen in places like South-east England e.g. Rochester; East Anglia e.g. Thaxted; The West Midlands e.g. Shrewsbury; The West, e.g. Bristol and The North e.g. York.

The level of alteration in a refronted building varies. Some have only been given a brick front retaining all of the timber framing behind, while others may have been heightened, cased in brick

(this is more likely to happen if more than one side of the house gave way to a street) or rebuilt on the back elevation as well as the front. Some rather modest houses were refronted, while some Georgian-style houses with very grand facades were refronted too. This may have been because the timber framing was very good quality and so people wanted to preserve it. One of the best examples in the country of the latter is Granville House, Shrewsbury (below).

With its grand, symmetrical facade of c1740, complete with pediment and parapet, it seems rather surprising that, as we conveniently know from the side, it is refronted. There is nothing about the facade to suggest this fact.

We can see from Granville House that when it was refronted, it was heightened as was the case in many instances. It could have just been a century between when the 17th century building was built and when it was refronted, which shows the scale of this architectural shift.

Refronting was not just peculiar to towns; it was also very prominent in the countryside and happened with manor houses.

Jettying, which was the height of fashion with timber-framed houses (the more sides jettied, the merrier) fell out of fashion as refronting started happening.

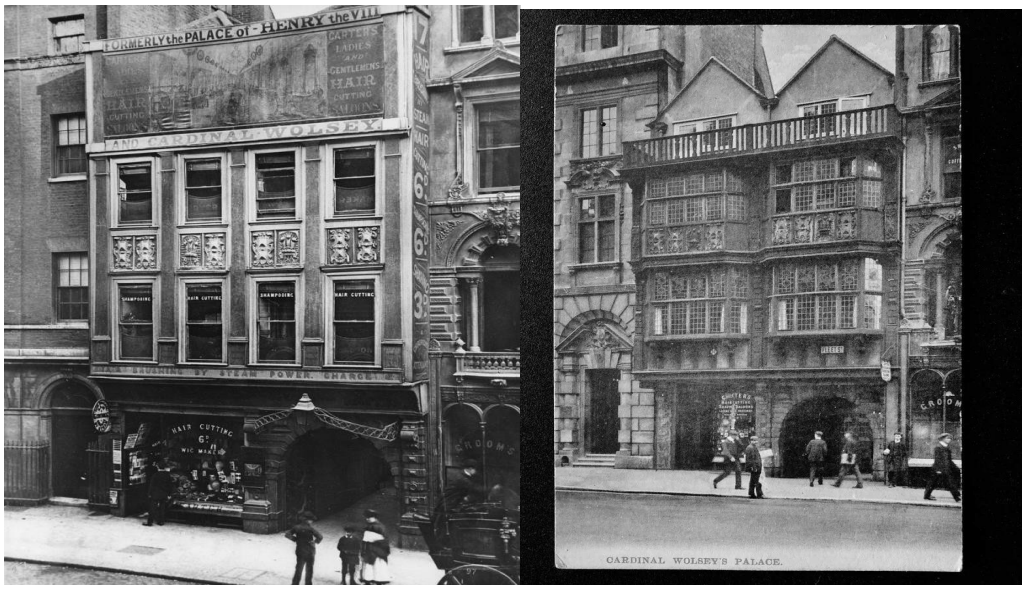
The examples of houses which, though refronted, retain their jettying are faced with mathematical tiles. This can be seen in Canterbury and at St Bartholmew the Great's gatehouse, London, before 20th century restoration.

It is important to observe the distinction between a refronted building and a building which was not refronted but built with a mixture of brick and timber, just as a modern house's roof is timber-framed, with rafters etc. but is not refronted.

Refronting was still a common occurrence in the early 19th century, but what changed in Victorian times was that buildings were much more likely to be completely rebuilt, and this spelled an end to refronting. There was a rise in the number of purpose-built buildings. If, in Victorian times, someone wanted to cheaply rebuild a house, they might have completely rebuilt the front section, leaving a timber framed range behind, e.g. with 35 Market Place, Henley.

In more recent times, there has been a fashion for the removal of a later front on a building to reveal the timber-framing. This has happened in London most notably, an example being the gatehouse to Inner Temple Lane, the first-floor room looking over Fleet Street being called Prince Henry's Room. This was built in about 1600 and was refronted some time in the 18th or early 19th century. Philip Norman, writing in London Vanished and Vanishing (1905) wrote the following when it was still refronted: "When the house was remodelled, now long ago, the old front was

completely covered and concealed by a new one, brought slightly forward and projecting equally before the rooms of the first and second floors, the bays being removed. The present flat windows were inserted, and the original panels rearranged. On the first floor there is a space of about 1 foot 9 inches between the old front and the present one. The top story or attic, structurally but little changed, consists of two gables with their tiled roofs slightly hipped." Sometime after these words were written, the facade was removed and significant alterations happened, the result of which can be seen today.



Inner Temple Gatehouse. Left: before removal of façade; Right: after

PART TWO: IDENTIFICATION

This should not be too much of a challenge if you can get inside the building in question, see the back of it or get up close with the rafters. But this section mainly concerns identification just from the facade, which is much more difficult. As I said earlier, the list at the end of this article should help you with this task because, when you have seen many examples, you notice the patterns and have that skill.

Size as a means of judgement

Some houses are surprisingly small compared to others on the same street. This could be because they were tiny timber-framed houses which were refronted. By no means is this a perfect way of judging, because some refronted buildings were big half-timbered houses in the first place and also because some were heightened, but if there is a Georgian-looking house in a street where the rest are a lot taller, it is quite likely to be one.

Left: 43 London Street, 17th century and demolished in the last few years. On the right is 105 London Street.

Irregular Rooflines and Parapets

Most refronted buildings have parapets. Parapets were part of classical architecture in the 18th century and, in the case of refronted buildings, were used to hide irregular rooflines.
Parapets became a common sight in London after the Great Fire and were made mandatory by the Building Act of 1707 which banned projecting wooden eaves and encouraged parapets in the City and Westminster. This was meant to minimise the risk of fires and coincided with refronting becoming ubiquitous in London, which influenced the rest of the country. Refronted houses without a parapet may have been less altered and are usually plastered. This is the case in Paris with its “high white houses, each containing fifty families” as EV Lucas put it. Many old Parisian houses were destroyed in Haussman's massive redevelopments, but picturesque spots remain, as in Rue de Galande and Rue de Lanneau.

If you can see that behind the parapet the roofline is rather irregular, this is good evidence that the building is refronted. In many list entries, irregular roofs are referred to as ‘old tiled’. Lots of refronted houses do not have irregular rooflines as they were heightened and given a new roof structure. A visual example of this can be seen on page 102 of Oxford Before the University which shows a plan of 89-91 St Aldates.

The use of tie-rods

These are metal rods which run through old buildings if they are not very stable. They can connect to timber beams. They could have been used on a refronted building if the facade was at risk of collapse because it was not built very well and was separating itself from the timber-framed structure. A great quantity of refronted houses have tie-rods. Tie-rods are commonly in the shape of an X, S or crucifix.

Dormers lower than the parapet

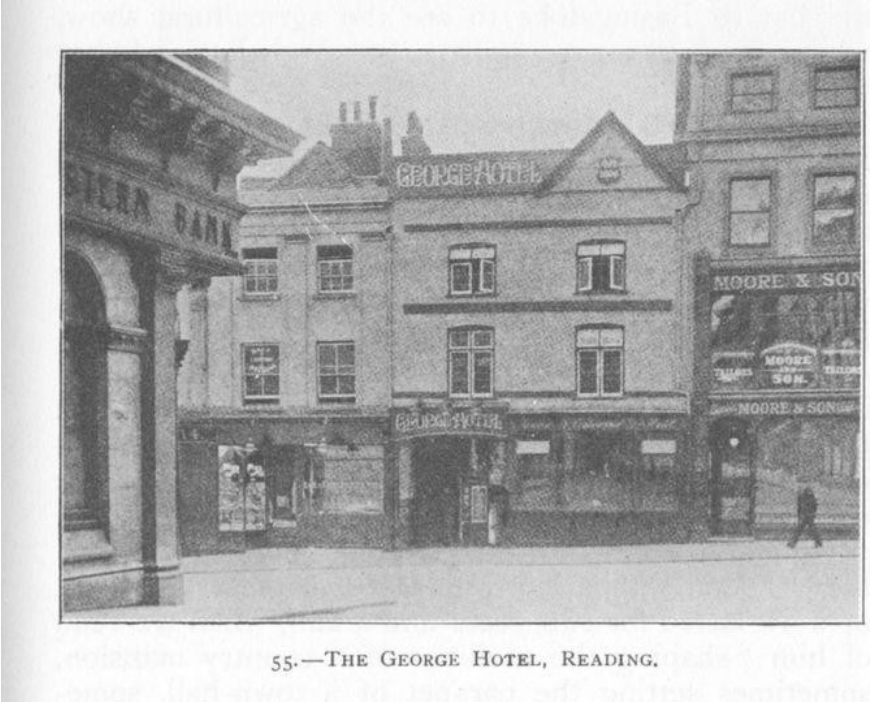
These are a sign that a building may be refronted, especially if the dormers are not in the style of the rest of the facade.

EXEMPLARS IN READING WHICH ARE OR WERE REFRONTED

Left-right: 35 Southampton Street, c 1937 and 1960. Its plaster facade, complete with tie-rods tells us at a glance, that this is refronted. The slightly irregular roofline and weatherboarding at the side are also substantial proof.

Left: Houses in Friar Street, demolished late C19, all refronted. The site is now occupied by the Market Arcade

Right: an unfamiliar view of The George Hotel, as it was before 20th century alterations to the facade. We can see it is refronted because of the old tiled hipped roof.



Left: a very strange building, 62 St Mary's Butts. It used to have two sash windows on the first floor, but these were removed in the 20th century. It is evident this was refronted because of the irregular roofline and dormers. Demolished at some time in the last 40 years.

Left: 5-6 Friar Street, The Wheatsheaf, 1929. This timber-framed range was exposed when the corner site adjoining was demolished to make way for Somerset House. It was demolished in about 1960.

Right: the white building in the middle was 69 London Street, another photograph of which appears earlier on. Its facade was 18th century, fronting a timber-framed house. We know it was refronted, as when its timber-framed internal structure collapsed (possibly due to neglect) the frontage did not fall with it, meaning it was not connected to the rest of the house.

Left: 90 London Street, 1973. Here we can see the brick front to Church Street, and behind it, timber-framing. After this was taken, number 90's facade was preserved while the timber-framed section was demolished, a similar arrangement to the fate of nos. 49-53 London Street.

LIST OF THE BUILDINGS IN READING TOWN CENTRE WHICH ARE OR WERE REFRONTED

In this list, I have included buildings which I am sure were or are refronted. A great many more are omitted because of uncertainty. As well as existing buildings, I have included buildings which were demolished less than 100 years ago as references.

LONDON STREET

I have chosen to start my list with London Street as this contains the most refronted buildings in Reading.

London Street was established after the Abbey was founded. In the 18th and 19th centuries, it was one of the most fashionable streets in Reading. It was lined with Georgian townhouses, and could, I think, have been considered as Reading's High Street. It was in this era that many of the street's houses were refronted.

BIBLIOGRAPHY FOR LONDON STREET

Leslie Harman, The Parish of S. Giles-in-Reading, 1946.

Derek Sherborn Esq, List of Buildings of Architectural Interest in Reading, 1958. To be seen in Reading Central Library.

London Street Described, 2007.

<u>From the South-East end</u>

1. 105 London Street. Two storey facade of c 1820, fronting 17th century or earlier building. Both Sherborn and Harman mention it.

2. Formerly 83-85 London Street. This was a pair of 15th century timber-framed houses, the facade altered in the 18th or 19th century and plastered over. They were demolished in 1971. In the 15th century, there may have been an oratory chapel here (see p.22 of The Parish of S. Giles-in-Reading by Harman). This assertion is strengthened by the fact that the religious monogram IHS was found in a first-floor room of Number 83 (see Berkshire Archaeological Journal number 44 of 1940, under the heading of 'An Old Fresco Painting'). Later on, 83 became an inn, named in its time The Hind Head, The Fountain and The Wheatsheaf. A passage between 83 and 85 lead to Fountain Court.

3. Formerly 69 London Street. Two storey Georgian facade. A study of the building from 2001 by John Moore reads thus: "69 London Street was a Grade II listed building, which collapsed in c.1998, leaving one principal truss standing. The north gable was the only part of the original 16th century house to be left standing. There was however enough evidence in this gable to gain some understanding of the original building. The original house was probably never more than two bays in length. It is not known what the internal arrangements of the building were like, but it is probable that the ground floor was in commercial use for most of its existence. Many timbers were retrieved and sorted. Six of these timbers were considered part of original structure and one

yielded a precise felling date of 1579. The building was found to be 150-200 yrs older than the listing description of it as 18th century."

4. 49-53 London Street. These were two 16th-century houses with an 18th century facade, separated on the ground floor by the through-passage to Steeple Court. There were some old cottages in Steeple Court (timber-framed) which would have been inhabited by very poor families. In the mid-20th century, they fell into picturesque dereliction and were demolished at some time before the 1980s. In the mid 1980s, 53, except for the façade, was demolished and rebuilt, while the timber-framing behind 49's 18th century facade was retained but substantially altered. 53 was rebuilt using the old timbers. Down the side of 49, in London Court, you can see the timber-framing. The list entry has recently been amended and therefore is very good and extremely detailed.

5. Formerly 43 London Street. Sherborn says this about it: "House now shop of early C17 with a simple queen post roof. The back walls are of brickwork perhaps of C18. The front downstair room is panelled to the ceiling with early C18 panelling with staircase of this period. The back room has, inserted upside down in a window of C1820, an inscribed pane of glass with the following lines scratched with a diamond; 'Eliz Lucas, March 3 1745. Thus oft dull wits their nonsense write And make the beams of blushing light, reveal the deeds that shame the night' Upstairs is an early C17 panelled door with two pairs of coxhead hinges."
   It is evident that it was much altered in the 20th century after Sherborn wrote this. It was not listed when it was demolished a few years ago for a development. There is a detailed report by Reading Borough Council which endorses the plan. Strangely, the civic society endorsed the plan too.
   By the time of demolition, the facade was still 18th century, but whether the roof structure remained 17th century is a mystery to me as it seems no one looked at it.

6. Formerly 21-23 London Street. 18th century facade. Demolished in 1977.

7. Formerly 17-19 London Street. 17th century timber-framed house with 18th century facade. Demolished in 1977. See the report on it by H. Godwin Arnold.

<u>From the Northwest end</u>

8. Formerly 60 London Street. Rebuilt in the 20th century.

9. 80 London Street. This is a half-timber house probably of the 17th century, possibly altered in the 18th century and refronted in the 19th century. The roof is half-hipped. The list entry has recently been amended and is very good.

10. 88 London Street. This is a small 16th century house with an 18th century facade. The Church Street elevation is jettied. The London Street elevation would have also been jettied. The roof is half-hipped, and the rear elevation is weatherboarded. It has been weatherboarded since at least the 1940s. The list entry is very good.

11. Formerly 90 London Street. 18th century facade to timber-framed building. In recent years, the rear was rebuilt while facade was retained.

12. Formerly 106 London Street. Harman says this was 17th century. In the 20th century, it was rebuilt with the facade in a similar style to the 18th century original.

CHURCH STREET

1. 8-10 (now 6b) Church Street. 18th century facade.

SOUTHAMPTON STREET

1. Formerly 35 Southampton Street. Timber-framed building of the 17th century, with plaster facade. Demolished in the 1970s.

BRIDGE STREET

1. Formerly the Bear Inn. Sherborn states that the wall at the rear was 17th century or earlier.

CASTLE STREET

This is a street lined with old townhouses leading to the Bath Road. Lyndford House, number 17, is a notable example of a well-preserved Tudor house in Reading with an original facade. The street was blighted by the IDR and the erection of the municipal buildings on the north side in the 1960s.

1. 13 Castle Street. 18th century facade with timber-framing.

ST MARY'S BUTTS

<u>East side</u>

1. Allied Arms. Early 19th century façade to ancient timber-framed cottage.

2. Formerly 62 St Mary's Butts, mentioned earlier. 17th century, with possibly 18th or 19th century facade. Demolished in the last 40 years.

<u>West side</u>

1. Formerly 1 St Mary's Butts, The White Hart. 18th century facade to earlier building.

***There were many refronted buildings on the west side, but they are long gone and researching them would be a very difficult task. ***

GUN STREET

1. 15 Gun Street. 17th century. Early 19th century facade.

BROAD STREET

It cannot be said for certain that any refronted buildings still exist on this street, though some ancient buildings remain, including 95 Broad Street, 96 (the former Post Office Tavern) and 2-3 Broad Street (1 Broad Street no longer exists, but was of some antiquity.) An example of a refronted house, long gone, is Ye Olde Curiosity Shoppe on the corner of Cross Street.

FRIAR STREET

1. 134-5 Friar Street. Much altered.

MARKET PLACE

1. 30-31 Market Place. An ancient house externally altered in the 18th century and refronted in the 20th century with a Mock-Tudor style facade. Formerly the Coopers' Arms.

(Butter Market)

1. Formerly 1-3 Butter Market. Number 2 still exists.

(High Street)

1. Formerly the Broad Face Inn. This was an ancient hostelry, demolished 1926.

KING STREET

1. The George Inn (N.E section to King Street.) This is timber-framed, refronted in probably the 18th century, this facade replaced by the current one in the 20th century.

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PHOTOGRAPH CREDITS

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