

A few things about The Bell - from the renovation work

We took film and photos up the flue of the main fireplace which was built at the same time as the present pub (it holds up the Eastern wall) and that doesn't show much other than that it is a fine chimney indeed, which follows the classic proportions for draw, etc.

I should say for the record that I had the crack to the right of the surround (right over the bearing on the jamb) reinforced about 18 years ago, using a stout stainless steel dowel drilled in from the alcove wall side, so you need not worry about that. The crack through the apex in the middle was reinforced with an iron strap many years ago, and this can be seen by sticking your head up the opening. It could be replaced with stainless, but I don't think that it has moved much since being put in, so should be alright in the future.

The iron reinforcing under the canopy to the front wall will need to be sorted out sometime in the future, as it is starting to rust from the inside, and the slight swelling of the metal is opening up the cracks even more. I have pointed the cracks to the top of the hood with pure lime, so this should stop most of the water from running through and down, meaning that any further rusting will be caused by atmospheric moisture in the main. Apart from anything else, it is a pretty ugly arrangement which could be done away with by secret stainless reinforcing.

I also photographed the patch of historic painting which was uncovered during the work, and these are also on the disc. As you know, It was decided that the area which was exposed was in too poor a condition to be worth leaving as it was, so I gave it a coat of pure lime before it was painted over. The area where it is can be seen from close up, but blends in ok from a distance. The only decipherable words on this 19th century advert were 'Hops' and '& Straw'. I suppose the hops related to the brewery side of it, and the straw to the stabling facilities.

It has become clear that the existing front (which dates from the first half of the 18th century) was simply tacked on to a much older facade, part of which must have been destroyed to create the large, Georgian windows. There are small casement windows to the rear and West gable end, and these seem to date from the late 17th century. I would think that the original facade had the same windows in it, corresponding exactly to the level of the existing ones, which are perfectly in line, back to side.

The square chimney which used to run up the front to the right of the door, utilised the thickness of the wall by running the flue through from the little

internal fire place (for coachmen to warm themselves by) where the gas meter now is, to about five feet up on the outside. The electric extractor fan is set in the same cavity.

I bumped into Andrew Swift and Kirsten Elliot the other day outside the pub, and Andrew came up with an extremely interesting observation. He explained the reason for the three, evenly spaced windows to the top floor, in contrast to the five below them and the four (plus door) on the ground floor. The Bell would have originally been a rubble masonry front with cut quoins around the frames, as was the norm before Ralph Allen started to mass-quarry dimension Bath stone. The three top windows correspond to three small gables which must have been destroyed when the new front was put up. See the old painting of Ladymead House in the Victoria Gallery for an example of this.

The present roof of Welsh slate was rebuilt as a single-pitch, and would probably have had stone tiles to cover the three gables, running into a roof with a different pitch to it.

I have also taken a bit of footage through a gap to the left hand side of the facade, and poked the camera in a cavity between the 'new' front and the old, but so far, this does not show anything of real interest - some rubble, some smooth stone and a part of the concrete-block pier that was built to support the RSJs for the West wall when it was knocked through to form the other part of the pub bar, about 30 something years ago.

The early casement window to this wall is now covered over by the new sign, but the bricked-in door-opening below it is still obviously visible. If there was not an extension to this level at one time, then there must have been an external - possibly wooden - staircase leading to the stable yard, but I am not sure about any of this right now.

The area which was reinforced by Sally's gang (the weakest part) has a short length of cut, diagonally set stones which can still be seen from the street, to the left. They look as though they could have been an abutment to a slightly lower extension - possibly relating to the earlier roof-line - but I'm not sure about this either.

The back wall of the early Victorian (?) extension seems to have been made using rubble taken from a much earlier structure, because it contains quite a lot of White Lias, which was commonly used in the 17th century before cut block became widespread. The side-wall to the old Bingo Hall in Sawclose is made entirely of White Lias, and Andrew and Kirsten tell me that this building dates from quite early in the 17th century, with - once again - a fair-faced Georgian facade built onto the

front.

Amongst the bits of historical documents I have borrowed from Ian Wood, there is a map to some deed papers which clearly shows a low wall running between the left hand side of the front door and just around the corner of the stable-yard entrance. This wall followed exactly the same line as the pavement does today, and was built to protect travelers to the inn from getting splashed by mud from passing coaches as they got out of their own coach and made their way to the front of the pub.

I have a strong hunch that the two cheeks of stone either side of the set of steps to the rear which lead up to the garden are parts of this wall, but - as yet - I can't prove it. When building these steps, it would have made more sense to use rubble than two very large blocks of sawn stone - unless the sawn stone was right to hand.

I also believe that the present level of the garden is about four or five feet higher than the old stable-yard would have been, which would necessitate steps up from the back where these cheeks are now.

The original stable-block was built up against the retaining wall where the Love Lounge is now, and I really cannot see them wanting to take the horses up quite a steep incline - or even (when the inn was free-standing in open space) driving them up it either. Before the Paragon was built, the pub would have been built on a very gentle incline which would have been easy to level-out by gently cutting into the hill.

Equally, I do not understand why they would have wanted to fill up the area with what would have been tons of rubble and earth, other than it being easier to do that with demolished structures than to cart it all away. It would be good to see what was beneath the tarmac of the garden - maybe we can find someone who designs sonic surveying equipment to bring it into the pub...

The concave curve to the old shop-front which is now the lighting shop on the other side of Walcot Street was reputedly to allow coaches and horses to take a wide swing into The Bell Inn yard, and if this is true, it means that they would have taken coaches quite deep into the rear of the pub, rather than simply stopping outside in a straight line to change horses, etc.

It is all very interesting, and I will see if we can get Andrew and Kirsten to do a bit more detective work.