

Oxfordshire

FALKLAND HALL AND EDMUND SILVESTER

No. 42–44 High Street, now called Falkland Hall, is one of Burford's most intriguing buildings. The received story is straightforward:

(1) the house was built by the clothier Edmund Silvester in 1558, as shown by a lost datestone inscribed ES 1558;

(2) a drawing of 1821 by J.C. Buckler confirms the Silvester connection, and shows the house before modern changes;

(3) comparing the drawing with the existing building shows how it was subsequently altered.

Closer investigation has called much of this into question, illustrating the complexities of the evidence we use in unravelling building histories.

The Silvester Connection and the Datestone

The earliest evidence unequivocally connecting the building with the Silvester family is Buckler's drawing, captioned 'A mansion of the Silvesters'. But Buckler must simply have been told this, and though he drew a datestone he filled it only with a squiggle. Local memory states that the datestone was reset to face inwards during early 20th-century building work, but no firm record of the inscription has been found, and early photographs are too murky to help.

Moreover, Edmund Silvester's will of 1569 mentions houses only on the other side of High Street. The location of his own 'dwelling house' is unfortunately not given, and could have been Falkland Hall, where a descendant held 'the Corner House' in 1594. But the family owned several other properties including an imposing timber-framed house at 109 High Street, which could equally have been where Edmund lived.

The Buckler Drawing

Buckler is valued by building historians for his accurate draughtsmanship. Yet close inspection of his Falkland Hall drawing suggests that he added fanciful details. Instead of showing the 18th-century sash windows that face the street today, and which must have been there by 1821, he apparently substituted windows that he thought more appropriate to a Tudor building. Buckler was an architect who specialized in restoration of historic buildings, and tried to interpret the original designer's intentions.



Figure A. *The Buckler drawing of 1821 (left), and (right) the existing front, showing 18th-century windows.*

The Building

Investigation of the building has shown that this is not simply a 16th-century house altered after 1821 (see Gazetteer). Though some 16th-century features remain at the back, the building's façade *overlaps* the gateway to the former Bear Inn to the north, built in the 1640s. Whatever stood on the site of Falkland Hall must therefore have been substantially altered in the 17th century. This ties in with other building evidence, which shows that adjoining cottages on Priory Lane were remodelled to connect with Falkland Hall in the 1650s. All in all, the evidence suggests that Falkland Hall was rebuilt about that time as a lodging range for the Bear, with which it formed a single property in the early 19th century. The general configuration of the buildings (see Figure B) supports this, and recalls a similar arrangement at the Bull Inn in Dorchester-on-Thames where an extension was built in 1610.

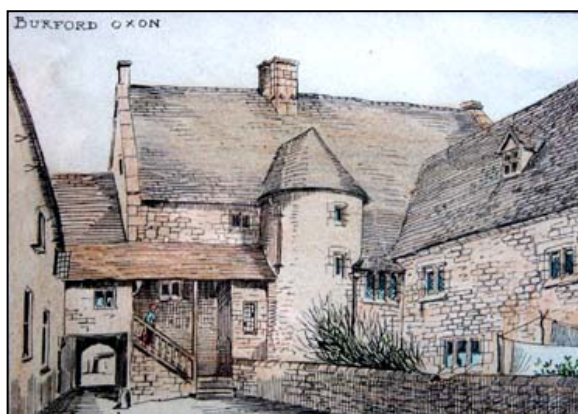


Figure B *This unsigned 19th-century view of the back of Falkland Hall shows its close relationship to the Bear Inn (left) and Priory Lane range (right). The large stack, stair tower, and covered external stair (all now gone) fit its use as a lodging range.*

What, then, remains of the received story? In place of a 16th-century merchant's house, we have a complex multi-phase building remodelled in the 17th century as an extension to the Bear. Buckler's drawing is shown to have limited value as objective evidence, which calls into question his other Burford drawings: that of 25 Sheep Street (Calendars), for instance, also seems not to fit the building. Whether Edmund Silvester built or lived at Falkland Hall remains unknown – the possibility has not been ruled out, but neither can it be taken as proven.

Read more in the EPE book Burford: Buildings and People in a Cotswold Town, by D Clark, A Catchpole and RB Peberdy (publication 2008)