

Fireplace from 31 High Street Sittingbourne

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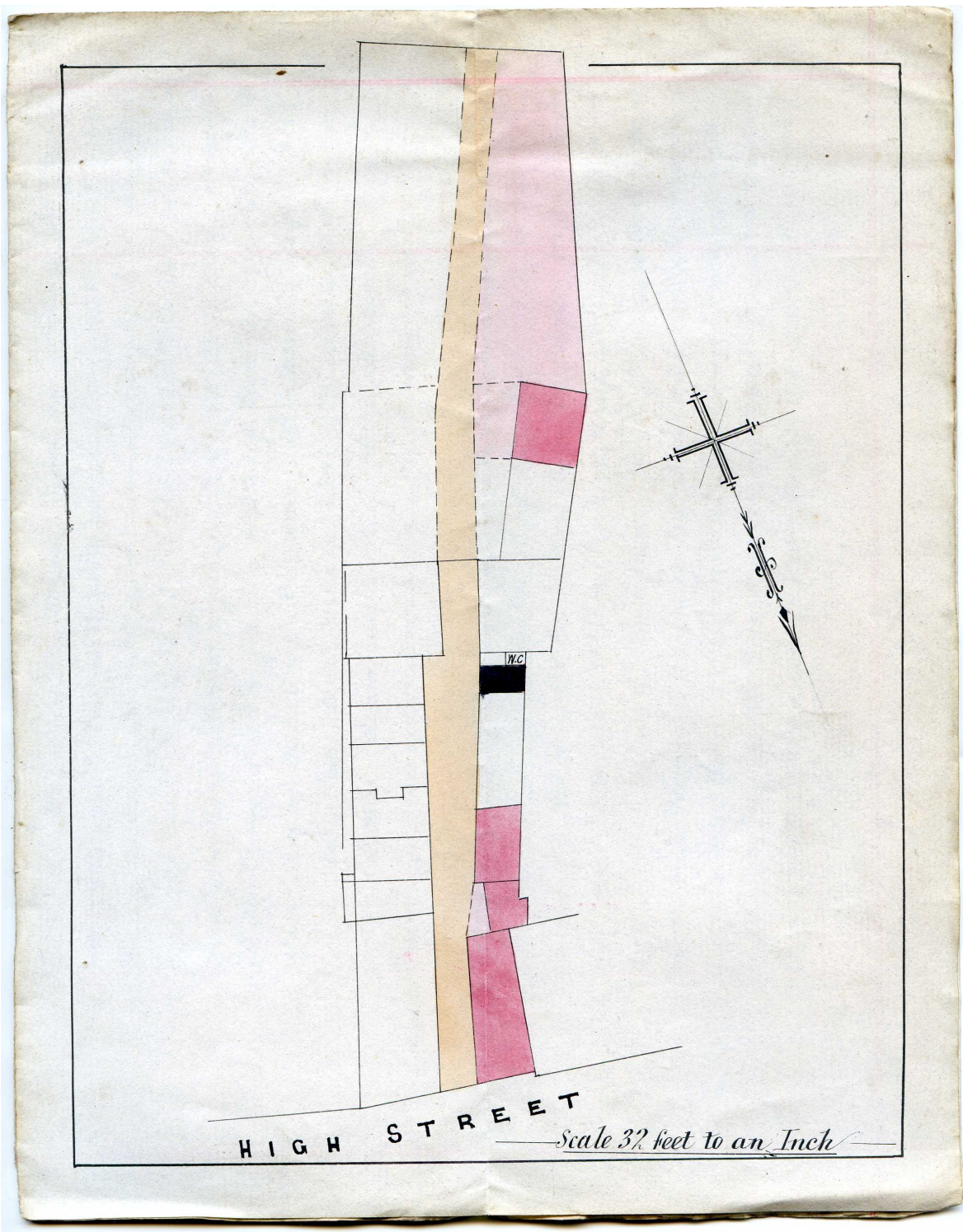
In the late 19th and early 20th centuries the freehold owner was William Howard Aymer Vallance of Aymers at Lynsted, a member of the brewing and banking family, and himself one of the best-known antiquarians of this district.

Having, it seems, made some arrangement with William Cremer, the occupier of the shop, Mr Vallance removed from no. 31 a stone fireplace and, we are told, some ancient brackets, which he took to Stoneacre at Otham, near Maidstone, another 15th century building which he acquired in 1920. His architect was young Marshall Harvey of Sittingbourne. Given the hands-on involvement, strong views and reputedly moody nature of this client, Mr Harvey did well to stay the course.

The plan of nos. 31 and 33 dated 1903, eighteen years before removal of the fireplace, shows it in situ, where now there is an open space, the spot marked only by a change in floor level. Standing there today, surrounded by television screens, it is not easy to imagine the carousing which took place when this was a rowdy inn. Imagination can fly more easily standing beside this fine ancient piece of stonework in the peace of its present setting at Stoneacre.



See plan below



further notes below



We are told by the National Trust experts that the dragon figure in the spandrels of the fireplace is an amphisbaena – a snake-like creature, with a head at the end of its tail, sometimes depicted with two legs, like a wyvern. Close examination of this picture suggests that the creature is in fact a wyvern with its tail curled round the stem of a plant. The resemblance to the weather vane on Sittingbourne's Parish Church is striking – even to the curl in the tail – suggesting that the weather vane might have been copied from this creature carved on the fireplace across the road. Perhaps it was carved into the fireplace of the George Inn by someone who did not know that St George's dragon, like all such creatures, had 4 legs, not 2.

The wyvern was adopted long ago as an emblem of this district – Milton Council used to claim that it derived from Earl Godwin who ransacked that town 100 years ago – though this might be considered perverse justification for the town council's adoption of the marauder's emblem.

