

A History of Rowley's House and Mansion

Presentation to U3A Local History Group 3 on 4 July 2025

Introduction



You will all be familiar with this lovely building sitting on a car park in between the busy Barker Street and Hill's Lane. The three-storey timber framed building on the right is Rowley's House and the brick built one on the left is Rowley's Mansion. Both buildings are grade 2 listed.

The picture on the right shows its position in the car park. It has been described as being marooned in a sea of cars!

It currently lies empty, in a bit of a sorry state and not shown off to its best with all the hustle and bustle that goes on around it! I will bring you up to date on what I know about its future at the end, but first let me tell you it's story from its origins over 400 years ago, what we know about who has lived there and what it has been used for over the centuries.

I did my research using documents in Shropshire Archives, various books about Shrewsbury, some websites, a very useful Facebook group called Old Shrewsbury Pics and the information boards outside Rowley's.

As always, the books about Shrewsbury and the websites often contradict each other regarding names and dates but I have done my best!

The Rowley Family of Worfield

So, who was Mr Rowley of Rowley's House? Well, he was a man called William, who I have got to know quite well during my research. As you will hear, he was a mixture of things – successful businessman, a master brewer, cloth trader, alderman of the town, a family man and a Puritan but also a cheat, a lawbreaker and a rebel!

So, I will begin in Worfield where William was born. The Rowleys were an ancient Shropshire family from the parish of Rowley, a hamlet in Worfield near Bridgnorth. The family had a manor here from at least the mid 13th Century.



The picture shows Rowley House, the family seat in Worfield shown here in a watercolour painting from 1852.

We are going to start with a John Rowley who died in 1566 and was described in the Worfield register as a “Yeoman householder” which meant he was one of the wealthiest class of families who owned land and property. He is said to have acquired a fortune by marrying Mary Barrett, a widow of Astley Abbots, a small village near Bridgnorth. He was succeeded at Rowley by his eldest son, Roger, born 1530. At this time the Rowleys were a wealthy family of merchants, drapers and brewers.

Roger was succeeded by his son, also called Roger.

William Rowley 1572 - 1645

So, now we come to our William Rowley, born in Worfield in 1572. He was Roger’s 3rd son and it was this William Rowley who came to Shrewsbury and became the owner of Rowley’s House and Mansion. We don’t know exactly when he came but it is likely to have been around 1590. He is recorded as living in a house in Shoplatch and he would have been in his early 20s.

We know he was involved in the cloth trade and became a member of the Drapers’ Company in 1597 but his main business was brewing beer.

He married in 1598, at the age of 26, when he went back to Worfield to marry Ann in the family church and Ann then came to live with him in Shoplatch.

William was in partnership with a man called Richard Cherwell, who lived in Knockyn Street. His family had been in the brewing business and also the Welsh cloth trade since the 1520s. When Richard died in 1605, he left everything to William. This included a substantial amount of land and property. So, in 1605, aged 32, William moved from Shoplatch to Knockyn Street.

So, where was Knockyn Street? This picture shows the same street now.



J L Hobbs' book "Shrewsbury Street Names" explains that Knockin is a corruption of an earlier name – cucurbite, meaning shaped like a flask or cucumber and would therefore be a description of the shape of the street. How cucurbite becomes Knockin I don't know! It is in fact now Hill's Lane, the narrow lane leading from Mardol to Rowley's House. It changed from Knockyn Street to Hill's Lane after John Hill, mayor of the Borough in 1689 but more of him later.

Once there he added to the estate by buying more property and garden land in the area around it, known as Romaldsham. This is the area around Rowley's House that we know as Barker Street today.



It was named Romaldsham after an ancient chapel that was there dedicated to St Romald. There was also an Elizabethan mansion called Romboldsham Hall, dismantled in 1760.

So, we know that William was living in Knockyn Street in 1605. It is thought that the timber framed Rowley's House would have been built by the end of the 16th Century. From my research, it isn't entirely clear exactly when and even who had it built. There is no precise date but is thought to be around the time that William moved to Shrewsbury and he definitely came to own it.

So, by the beginning of the 1600s we know that William was settled in Knockyn Street with his wife, Ann. In 1605 they had a daughter, Alice who was baptised back in the village of Worfield. They went on to have more children including Roger,

Jonathan, Seth, Gideon, Joseph, Abigail, Anna and Benjamin. There was still a close connection with his family back in Worfield and we also know that he made a donation of £50 to the poor of Worfield parish for the distribution of bread.

Rowley's House

So, what was the house being used for? I don't know about you but I have always thought that the timber framed Rowley's House was a family home but it appears this was not the case. What is it about the building to suggest it was never used as a home? The most significant thing to note about the building is that there are no chimneys, a clear indication that it was not used as a home.

It is not clear what the original purpose for it was. Architectural evidence suggests it was constructed as a warehouse or store and not, as some say, as a brewhouse. It is likely that it was used for storage for both his brewing business and for storing cloth.

Rowley's Mansion



Then in 1618 the mansion was built. This is a definite date because it was recorded on a lead pipe on the building which has since been removed. It has to be assumed that it was built by William or by another member of the Rowley family. It was built as a separate house but now adjoins the original timber framed house. This was the first building built of brick in Shrewsbury. Brick had been used before but only in small quantities for flues and chimneys. Brick buildings were rare and only previously used in high status buildings such as Hampton Court Palace and Oxbridge colleges. So, this was the family home built in a grand style, designed to be seen. Many of the internal features are no longer there but it was described as having a great chamber adorned with a representation of the Creation, oak panelling and moulded plaster ceilings, one of which apparently survives.

The Brewing Industry in Shrewsbury



William started his career at a time of great change for the brewing industry. Before the 1600s brewing was on a small scale often done by small alehouses and brewers or bribsters as they were called and they were often women (the picture shows a lady bribster!). Beer or ale was brewed using fermented grain, usually barley. On the domestic scale, water could be heated over an open fire in a cottage and the beer brewed in the kitchen.

The big change came with the introduction of hops. This new beer style quickly became popular, it could be made in larger quantities and commercial breweries began to emerge across the country. These women bribsters and other small-scale brewers were squeezed out of the market. Shrewsbury was no exception. There was a huge increase in the number of alehouses in the town from 70 in the 1560s to 220 by 1630 but most were no longer brewing their own beer. Instead, by the 17th century the dedicated brewhouse was becoming commonplace. Commercial brewing licensing was controlled by magistrates.

William Rowley – Master Brewer

We know that William was one of only 5 great wholesale or common brewers of 17th Century Shrewsbury. The Corporation were ruthless in discouraging small producers in favour of the wholesalers.

By 1635 there is evidence that Rowley's brewery was being supplied with water from a pump near Mardol Quay and they also had a rubbish dump there for the brewery waste.

There was a malthouse at the old family home back in Worfield and it is likely that malt from here was taken up the River Severn in trows and brewed into ale at Rowley's Brewhouse.

So where was Rowley's Brewhouse? It is now agreed that it wasn't in Rowley's House itself but must have been in this area. It couldn't have been any of the surviving buildings.



It doesn't sound as if William was very popular!

By 1621 the people of Romaldsham (now Barker Street) were complaining about the noise made by his carts which were also said to be breaking up the road surface. Together with that, his dogs barked incessantly through the night.

There are many cases recorded against William for selling ale to tippling house which were not licenced and selling beer above the statute price. So, we are building a picture of William and he's not coming out too well at this stage!

Cases recorded against William Rowley:

- "Presentment that William Rowley (Brewer) sold ale above the statute price to William Woodinge (Cook) and Margaret Warter (Widow). 1634
- "Presentment by the jury that William Rowley (brewer) brewed ale on many occasions and sold it to Katherine Onslow (widow) who kept a tippling or ale house without a licence. Date of offence 20 October 1639"
- "Presentment by the jury that William Rowley (brewer) brewed ale on many occasions and sold it to Andrew Davies (butcher) who kept a common tippling house without a licence. Date of offence 7 February 1640"

Plus about 14 others!!

William prospers!

Nevertheless, by this time William was prospering and a well-known figure in the town. He became one of the town's balifs in 1628 and became an alderman on the new town council in 1638.

The Shrewsbury Puritans

A famous Puritan, Richard Baxter (1615-91), was born and raised in Shropshire.



In the 1620s Shrewsbury had become a centre in the Puritan movement stretching across Shropshire, Cheshire, Herefordshire and Warwickshire.

William was a key member of the Shrewsbury Puritans and a friend of Richard Baxter, who you see in the picture. Richard came from Shropshire and he was said to be one of the greatest Puritans in the country.

It is surprising that William became a Puritan. There was growing alarm in the town about the number of alehouses which were seen as “nests of criminality and idleness”. The Shrewsbury Puritans described them as “dens of vice” but nevertheless there was William, a key member of the Puritan movement while at the same time operating his brewing business and known to have sold beer to unlicensed premises.

The Church of England of course, very much disapproved of the Puritans. William was often in conflict with the Church of England because of his religious beliefs and was said to have committed offences because he did not frequent his parish church of St Chad’s and none of his children were baptised there.

William, a rebel in the Civil War

William was also a rebel in the Civil War of 1642. He was a parliamentarian and named as one of 13 members of the Town Council who were not loyal to the King. William and others were accused of uttering seditious speeches and for slandering

the government. He was barred from council meetings and was put on a list of “Shrewsbury Delinquents”.

He lived long enough to witness the capture of the town by the parliamentarians in 1645 but died that same year at the age of 72. He was buried in Old St Chad's churchyard.

William's descendants

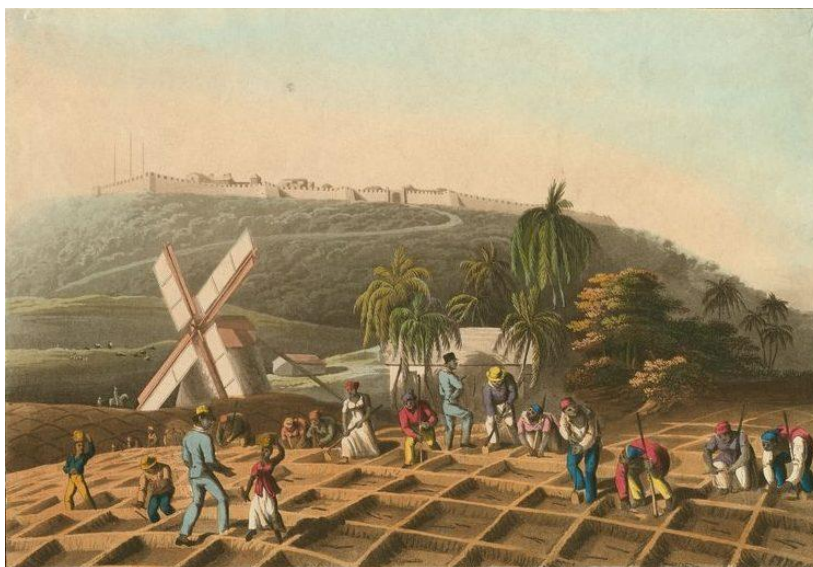
It was discovered that William had died in debt of £4,000. His son, Jonathan took over the brewing business. When Jonathan died in 1655, most of his father's debts had been paid off.

After Jonathan's death, the business went to his elder brother, Roger, who was a barrister and had until then had no interest at all in the brewing business.

Roger died in 1670 and was succeeded by his two married daughters, Priscilla and Mary. The eldest, Priscilla had married John Hill in about 1658 and it was she who inherited most of the estate which of course, in those days passed to her husband. John Hill was a descendent of the Hill family of Hawkstone. He died in 1680 and was succeeded by his son, also John Hill. This John Hill was known to enjoy the good life, he was very hospitable and entertained a lot at Rowley's Mansion. A famous playwright, George Farquhar was living in Shrewsbury and his play *The Recruiting Officer*, was set here. John Hill is said the model for one of the judges in the play.

John died in 1731 and was buried at St Chad's. The street on which Rowley's stands, Hill's Lane was named after this John Hill.

The Rowleys' connection to the slave trade



Although the details are sketchy the Rowley family did have a connection to Barbados in the 17th Century. In 1661, William's son, Seth was described as “a merchant and trader to Barbados”. John Hill owned land in Barbados and wills show

that these lands were passed down through the family. Although it cannot be proved, it is thought likely that previous generations of Rowleys, including William himself had been involved too. What we do know is that his son, Seth and son in law, John Hill certainly were. It may explain the second John Hill's liberal lifestyle suggesting he was enjoying the profits from sugar and the slave trade in Barbados.

Rowley's House and Mansion in the 18th Century

The house was passed through the Rowley family until the middle of the 1700s when it was rented out, notably by the curate of St Chad's, Thomas Adams in 1771, until 1775 when he resigned his living. Samuel Johnson, of the dictionary fame, was a friend of Dr Adams and stayed here in 1774. Shrewsbury was at that time a Summer season destination for people wanting to escape the smoke and stench of the cities. This part of the town was at this time, one of its most aristocratic quarters.

The Mansion in the 19th Century

This is a painting of the Mansion dated 1823 taken from the garden. The house was enclosed by a garden wall and at this time the garden ran down as far as the river.



What a difference! Another view of the mansion a decade later



In its heyday Rowley's Brewery was said to have been one of the largest in any county town in England so what actually happened to bring about its downfall? We don't really know.

During the 19th Century, the house and mansion were still owned by the Rowley family and rented out. It was still in good condition in 1808 but by 1837 decay had set in. It fell into a ruinous state.

During the 19th Century Shrewsbury grew less rapidly than other county towns. They didn't get to grips with the growing problems of squalid housing and poor sanitation quickly enough. This impacted on the area around Rowley's where everything fell into decline.

There was a trend for the wealthy to move out of town into suburban villas.

1860 - 1870



The mansion went through considerable change in the 1860s and 70s. It was being ransacked!

It was in 1865 that the picturesque stone porch was removed and taken to Abbey Gardens. Apparently, it was taken by a Mr Palin, a lawyer, presumably just because he liked it! He had married one of the Rowley descendants and he lived in the house which is now the Wakeman Sixth Form College. It is back where it should be now but more of that later!

By the 1870s the whole of the oak panelling from the mansion had been removed and sold. It is said that this is the period when the mansion was being used as a warehouse for storing bark!

The early 20th Century

When the artist, Phipson painted this scene at the turn of the 20th Century he was using some artistic licence. At the time the foreground would have been full of later industrial buildings.



Town guide Miss Evelyn Lloyd remembers what it was like before the First World War. She writes: 'There was a maze of terrible slum alleys and tumbledown hovels where Barker Street, Hill's Lane and Bridge Street now are. No sign of the lovely black and white Rowley's House could be seen. It was a rat and bug-infested tenement approached by dark narrow courts with the Ship Inn beside it. We were forbidden by our parents from approaching town by this route, and we had to go by St Chad's Church and down Claremont Hill or through the Quarry.'

The 1920s



The descendants of William Rowley put Rowley's House, Mansion and surrounding properties up for sale in 1919. There was a sale of multiple lots of land and properties between Barker Street and Hill's Lane.

R A Downes, a marine store dealer, bought Rowley's Mansion for £520. Then in 1922 Morris and Co bought a part of Rowley's House and a yard to the rear and they used it for storing oil! Apparently, there are still oil marks to be found on some of the beams.

The 1930s



By 1930 the original house had become almost lost in a warren of yards and passages. The pictures show the state it was in at this time. There was a row of slums that ran in front of the house. The actual road was that narrow, it was just big enough to squeeze two small carts down.

In 1931 the house was given to the town (that is The Council, then called the Corporation) by Morris and Company.



Arthur Ward to the rescue!



In 1930 a programme of alterations to the town centre began (a bit like now!). Motor vehicles had arrived and they needed wider roads to navigate the Medieval streets. They also decided they needed a car park. So, it was the Council's fault back then who thought it was a good idea to put a car park around this beautiful historic building! Barker Street was widened and some buildings demolished. Many houses described as insanitary and ruinous, were also demolished. This programme of improvement was all around Rowley's House.

Thankfully, a man called Arthur Ward, the Borough Surveyor, architect and civil engineer came to the rescue. The public took little interest in it and knew it only as a derelict old building. Arthur described it as "terribly dilapidated". It was he who saw its historical significance and he set about restoring it and making it structurally sound. Without Arthur, it may well no longer be there.

The restoration of the 1930s

The plot on which Rowley's House stood had gardens extending almost down to the river. During the clearance they found the remains of the neighbouring Cole Hall, an ancient stone building with only fragments remaining. There were also smaller warehouses used as brew houses and the Ship Inn. The inn was demolished and timbers from it were used to create an extension to Rowleys House. A lot of the timbers from surrounding buildings were used in the renovation of the house.

It was Arthur who persuaded the Corporation to modify plans for the car park to allow Rowley's House and Mansion to remain. They had to cut a passage through the building leading from one part of the car park to the other.

The mansion was not included in the restoration. It was still owned by R A Downes who continued to use it as a warehouse until 1972.



Once completed, Arthur turned it into a Roman museum storing newly discovered artefacts from Wroxeter from 1936.

A picture of the house and mansion from 1937



The 1940s



The 1950s

This picture is from 1951 when it was still a Roman museum with a coach and car park beside it.



In the 1950s R A Downes still owned a part of Rowley's Mansion known as 5 Hill's Lane. What he did was knock it down and replace it with a flat roofed brick building attached to the mansion, using it as warehouse and stores until 1972 when they sold it to the Corporation for £6,000.



The door surround from Rowley's Mansion in Abbey Gardens

The picture on the left is from 1957 and the one on the right from 1962.



You remember I talked about a Mr Palin who moved the door surround from Rowley's Mansion to the Abbey Gardens in 1865? Well, here it is, still there in the 1950s and 60s. It wasn't reinstated at the mansion until 1982 (Pevsner). This is the rear of the door surround, which has had various bits of stone ornament added from the former Shire Hall, to make it more attractive as a free-standing feature. There are lions on plinths on either side which are still there.

The 1960s



In the 1960s the car park was turned into the bus station until it moved to its present location in Raven Meadows in the 1990s.

The 1970s



The 1980s



In the early 1980s Rowley's Mansion was once again being restored including an upgrade to the fire escape and both buildings became the town's museum together with the Roman museum set up by Arthur Ward. The museum had previously been in the town library.

The work included the removal of the flat roofed extension and reinstating lost features of the mansion. This is also when they returned the porch from Abbey Gardens back to its rightful place.

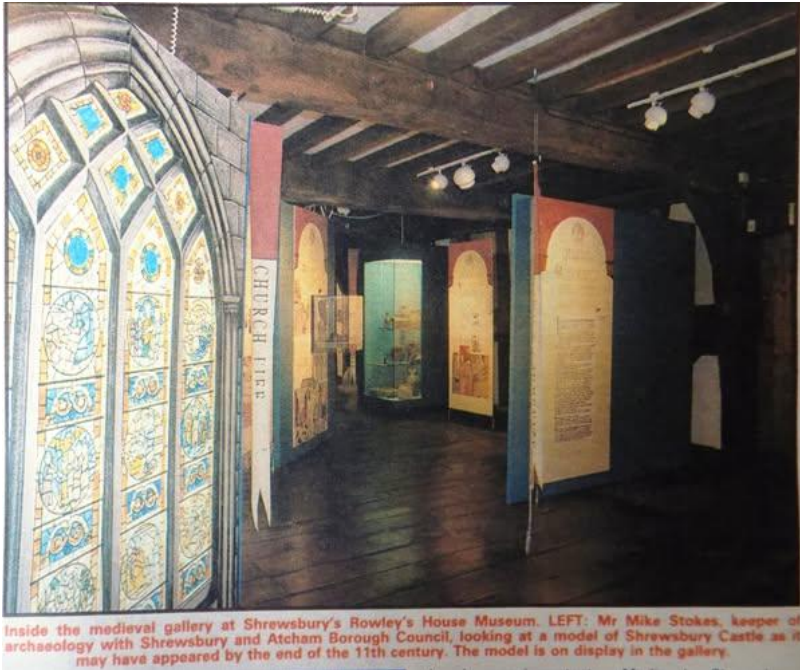


A panelled room was restored to house the Corbett Bed which had been in the V&A Museum.

It also included the removal of the toilets along the south side of Rowley's House.



An interior view of the museum from the 1980s



Apart from this one, I could not find any internal pictures of Rowley's House or Mansion.

The 1990s



A lovely view of Rowley's House on a sunny day in the 90s.

The 2000s



In 2002 the Council was looking at the site again. This included repair and refurbishment for its continued use as a museum and Tourist Information Centre which included plans for an extension of the Mansion to include a lift and a café. This never happened.

It was and still is a challenging building with difficult stairways and no disabled access and it was increasingly considered unsuitable as a public building. It was in 2009 that the new theatre was built in Frankwell to replace the Music Hall in the Square which had been the town's theatre. The Music Hall underwent a complete renovation. The museum contents of Rowley's House and Mansion were moved here and the Music Hall became the new Museum and Visitor Information Centre. This left Rowley's House and Mansion empty and unused.

Rowley's House was used from 2015 to 2017 by the University of Chester for teaching and admin and some events. The Council then asked them not to continue using it because of maintenance work needed. It has remained vacant ever since. It is still owned by Shropshire Council.

Present Day

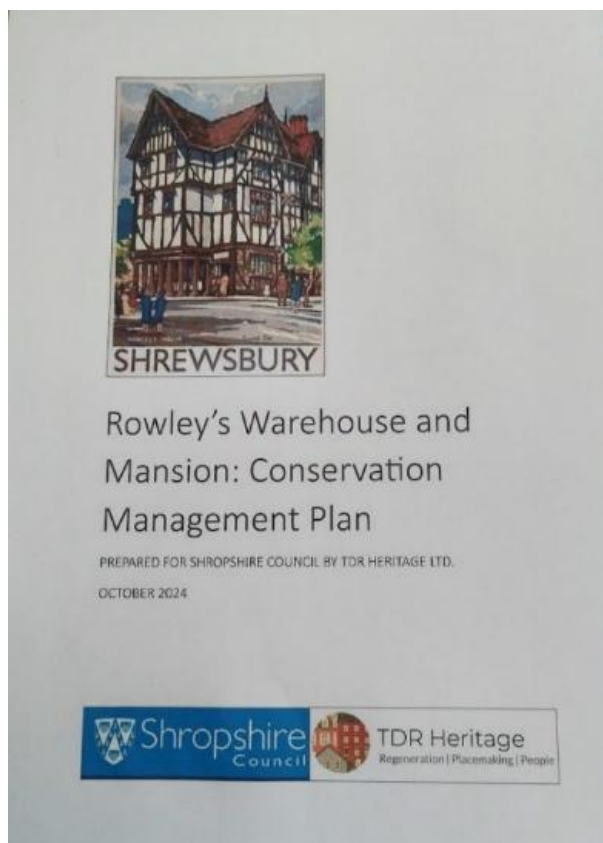


From the Summer of 2023 you will have seen scaffolding around the building. Work was done by Shropshire Council to stabilise the building and carry out repairs to the timber framing.

According to Pevsner the surviving internal features are few. All that is left are some plain stone chimney pieces and one original ceiling from the 17th Century.

In October 2023 Shropshire Council commissioned a conservation and management plan and feasibility study to help safeguard and find a viable use for Rowley's House and Mansion. It appointed Arrol Architects and historic building consultants TDR Heritage to prepare the plan expected to have been completed by Spring 2024.

The Future



I could not find out what happened so I emailed the Estates Team at Shropshire Council. They sent me this document – over 60 pages long.

What do you notice about the title of the document?

The word “warehouse”. It is no longer being called Rowley's House, making the point that it was built as a warehouse and never used as a home.

So, what does it tell us? It sets out “to develop an understanding of Rowley's Warehouse and Mansion, to inform how the site can best be cared for and sustained

for future generations to enjoy". It gives a good history of the site which was very useful to me, a very detailed analysis of the architecture and a conditions survey. It concludes that it is in a very poor condition and talks about the vast sums that would be needed to restore it. It talks about grants that could be obtained from organisations such as English Heritage and Heritage Lottery Fund to restore it but that can't happen without being able to say what it will be used for. I am sure discussions are ongoing and we look forward to hearing more about the future plans for these two iconic buildings in the heart of Shrewsbury.

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