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## THE ASHFORD CAGE

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The Ashford Cage, or no. 1 Middle Row, Ashford, stands at the northern side of the block of buildings originally built up on the old market-place. This block, now aptly named Middle Row, straddles the High Street, its narrow lanes separating a huddle of buildings of various dates (Fig. 1). A record of 1512 refers to 'the shops which are a-building in the market-place'. We may infer from this that a large part of this area was devoid of building before that date. The market-place would then have been roughly square and occupied by only temporary stalls. The narrow shop (Plate I) indicated by the plan shown in Fig. 2 may indicate that the building replaced one of these stalls. Even as late as 1773 the Court Records show that stalls called the 'Lord's Shops' stretched eastwards down the present High Street (see Fig. 2).

The tenancy of no. 1 Middle Row fell vacant at the end of 1981, and the owners embarked on a complete refurbishment of the premises, which were in a sad state of neglect. Adjoining the property and in the same ownership are two shops which were excluded from the contract for the work. Examination of the structure, however, was to show that the northern part of the block, no. 1, was to prove the more interesting. This northern elevation has always attracted attention by reason of the pargetting (already in need of repair), the oriel windows, the carved roof brackets and barge-boards, all of which were clearly of seventeenth-century work (Plate II).

The work started with the stripping of the linings from the interior walls of the ground-floor shop and the removal of the Victorian shop-front. The ruinous state of the pargetting necessitated its complete removal after tracings had been taken of the designs. The first important discovery was the existence of a dragon-beam at the north-west corner, showing that the building was of an earlier date than had been thought from its external appearance. Erection of scaffolding enabled the frontage to be examined more closely.

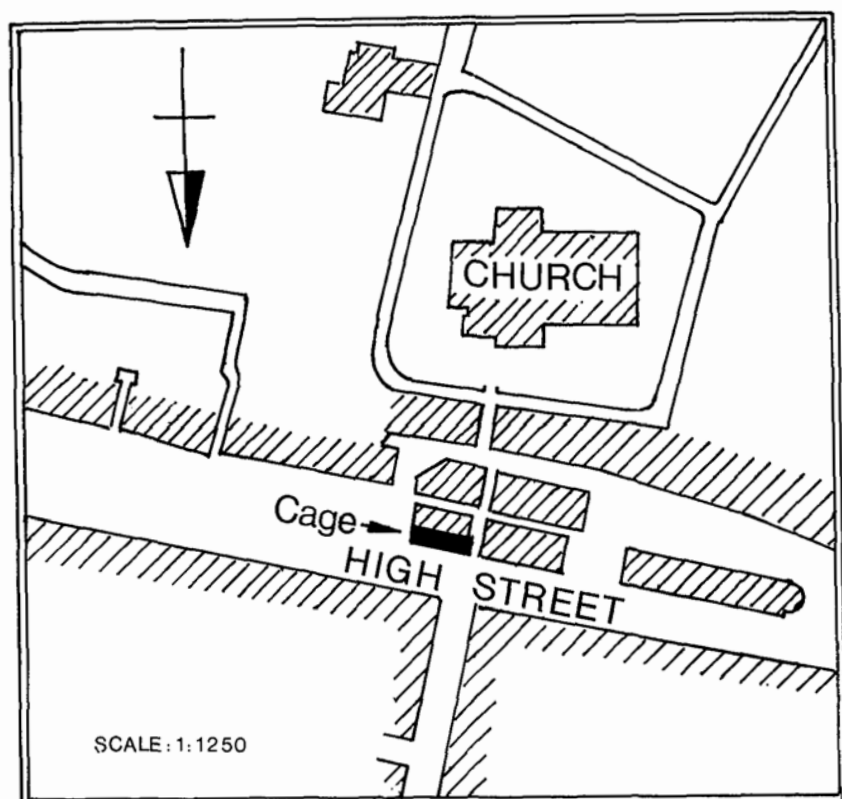


Fig. 1. Map of central Ashford, showing Site of the Cage.

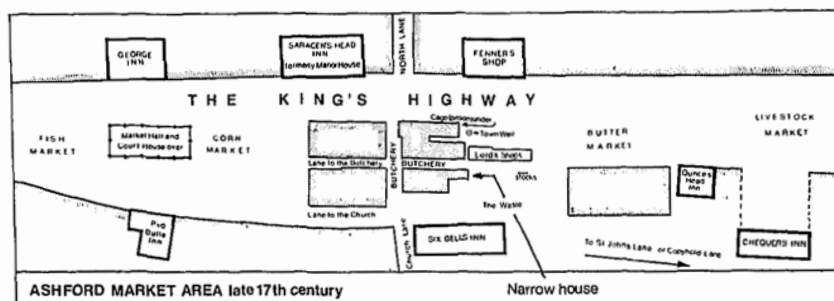


Fig. 2. Seventeenth-century Markets

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PLATE I



East End of Middle Row.

PLATE II



No. 1 Middle Row – nineteenth Century.

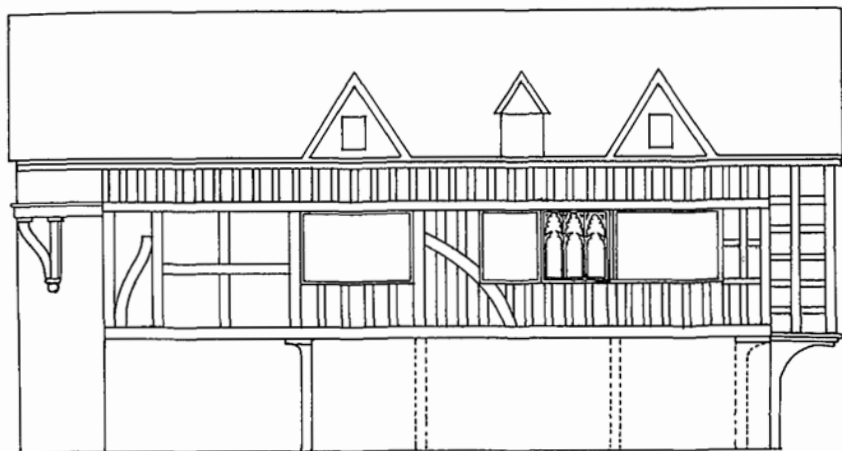


Fig. 3. The Timber Framing after Removal of the Shop-front and the Pargetting.

Further evidence was disclosed when the end of another dragon-beam was found at approximately 26 ft. from the one on the eastern end of the building.

It was now possible to see from the exposed timbering that there were three stages in the construction of the building. Firstly, a western section approximately 28 ft. long by 13 ft. deep, the oldest section. Secondly, an eastern section approximately 16 ft. long, an extension of later date. Thirdly, a major reconstruction in the seventeenth century, which involved the raising of the roof and the addition of a small oversailing section only 4 ft. at the western end of the building (Fig. 3).

#### THE CELLARS

These are reached by a winding staircase which, from the measurements made, was apparently outside the original curtilage of the original building. On the northern or High Street side a flight of stone steps was uncovered leading down to the cellars from the street. Adjacent to these steps is a lock-up long-known as the 'Cage' and has given its name to the whole building. A blocked-up door once led into the cell from the cellar. This small cell measures approximately 8 ft. long by an average width of 4 ft., the height being about 6 ft. The cell is situated actually under the pavement outside. The northern

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walls of the cellar, up to and including the cell, are built of Kentish ragstone. Beyond that point the walls are brick, probably built when the cellar was extended in the nineteenth century, as stretcher-bond was used (Figs. 4 and 5).

At the western end of the cellar are the remains of a large fire-place, constructed of Tudor brickwork. This is undoubtedly the below-ground part of the chimney mentioned in a copyhold document of 1736 which states:

'And also one chimney containyng in length ten feet and in breadth four feet lying and being in Ashford aforesaid and within the jurisdiction of the Mannor abutting to the copyhold shop late of Henry Gibbs towards the East by the like Services above-mentioned and by the Yearly Rent of one pound of the Lawull Money att the Feasts above mentioned by equal parts to be paid.'

As the chimney projected outside the building, the abutments confirm that the immediate area to the south was not built-up at that date.

### THE THREE STAGES OF CONSTRUCTION

#### 1. Western Section.

It will be realised that the refurbishment was going to provide a valuable opportunity, never previously available and unlikely to recur, of an investigation into the history of the structure. It will be

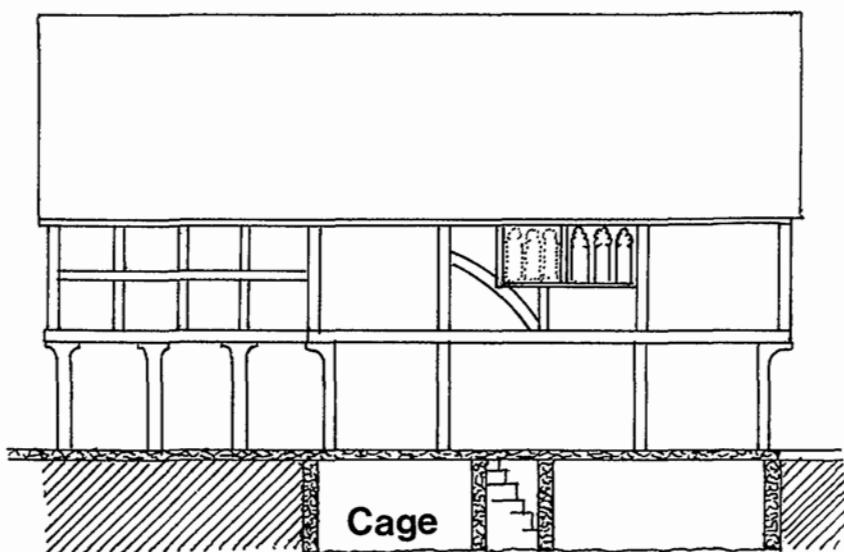
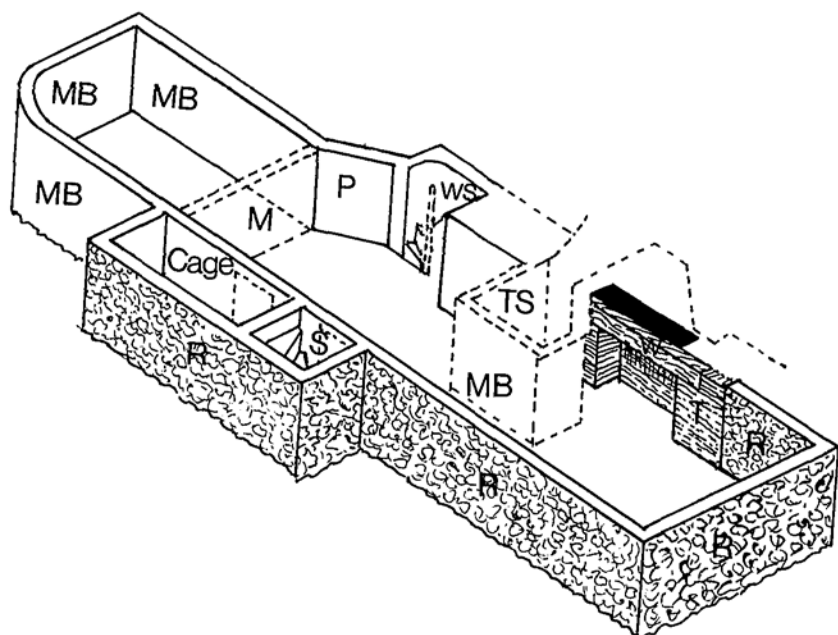


Fig. 4. The early House, showing the Cellars and the conjectural pillared Section and a possible second Gothic Window.



## KEY:

MB.	Modern brickwork.	W.	Wood bressummer.
P.	Plaster.	WS.	Winding stairs to cellar.
R.	Ragstone.	M.	Eastern, end of medieval building.
S.	Stone steps to the Cellar from the street.	TS.	Trader's store (modern extension to adjoining cellar).
T.	Tudor brickwork.		

Fig. 5. Isometric Drawing of the Cellars.

seen from Fig. 6 that the western section was a three-bay building of single-storey height. The three upright posts remain, but the fourth has been replaced by a steel one. At first-floor level most of the timber studding is present, but only one curved brace. The early fenestration was destroyed by the insertion of seventeenth-century windows, except for the one interesting oak window (Fig. 7). This is a three-light window with unusual tracery, the mullions having projecting spurs which may have continued across each light. One mullion has an iron sprocket which may possibly have been for a casement.

It will be seen from the drawings in Figs. 3 and 6 that a seventeenth-century window cuts into the brace. Was there another traceried window in this position? The style of the oak window would indicate that it is of early Perpendicular date. We may, therefore,

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conclude that previous to the installation of the window, the core of the building could be of early Perpendicular date, possibly during the lordship of the Huntingdons, i.e. before 1367.

### 2. Eastern Section.

The measurements of this section show that the timber-framing consisted of four equal panels. It will be noticed that in the photograph (Plate II) there is a brick-built corner to the building. The end-wall has been rebuilt with a quadrant, a common feature in many towns to facilitate the passage of traffic, particularly horse-drawn.

Court records give no tenants for the ground-floor of this part, which suggests that this end of the building may have been supported on timber columns in the manner of a number of market-halls. There is evidence that a well existed on this spot and this would have been a suitable siting for a town well, where it would be protected from the weather. Traders' stalls could also have been here.

There is no evidence of windows in this section at first-floor level. The window now facing east (see Plate I) is modern.

### 3. Seventeenth-century reconstruction.

In the early part of the seventeenth century a major reconstruction of the premises was carried out. The existing roof was taken off and a new one built, thus destroying any evidence of its construction. The new one was supported on a new roof-plate supported along the whole length of the building by 4 in.-thick studs morticed into the old plate at 12 in. intervals. This added 2 ft. to the height of the walls, enabling attics to be created (Fig. 3).

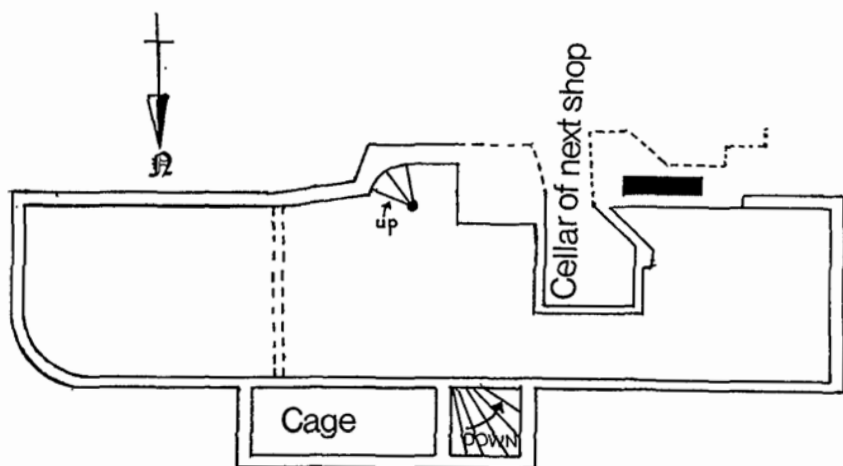


Fig. 6. Plan of the Cellars.



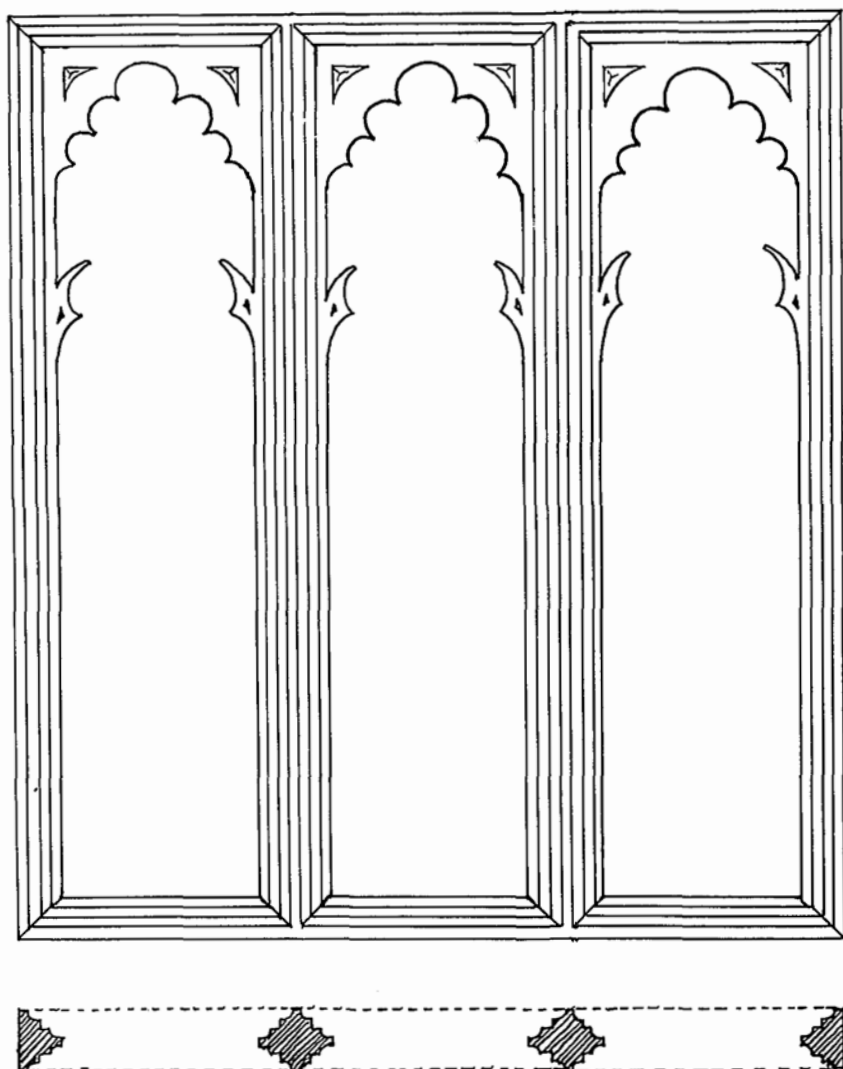


Fig. 7. The Gothic Oak Window.

The oriel windows, gables and dormers as seen today were constructed. At the west end a small extension of about 4 ft. was built out at first-floor level, thus overhanging the side lane. This is supported by two large brackets which have failed to prevent the section from having a downward lurch. The one facing the High Street is carved with grapes, a rose and foliage. At first sight these symbols might lead one to suspect that the premises were once used as an inn, but there is no recorded evidence of this.

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The pargetting was applied to the north elevation at this time. By covering over the medieval timbering, the whole appearance of the building was changed, thus concealing all evidence of the early character of the structure (Plate II).

### THE HISTORY

The recorded history of Ashford as a market town begins in 1243, when Henry III granted Simon de Cryol and his wife, Maud, the right to hold a fair in the Manor of Ashedeford every year, to last three days 'on the eve, day and morrow of the Decollation of St. John the Baptist', (28th, 29th and 30th August), and a weekly market on Saturdays. Later, in 1348, Edward III granted a charter to William de Clynton, Earl of Huntingdon, and Juliana de Leybourne his wife (the wealthy 'Infanta of Kent'). The charter records that 'they may have at the Manor of Esheteford one Fair yearly to last for three days, namely, on the vigil, on the day and on the morrow of St. Anne, unless the Fair be to the hurt of neighbouring fairs'. (St. Anne's Day is on the 26th July).<sup>1</sup>

The manor of Ashford was escheated to the Crown on the death of Juliana, Huntingdon's widow, owing to the fact that that lady died without an heir in 1367/8. The advowson of Ashford Church, as well as the manor, was held by Juliana, but Edward III settled the manor on the Dean and Canons of the Chapel of St. Stephen at the King's Palace at Westminster, and the advowson of the church was given to the Abbey of Leeds in the Diocese of Rochester. The grant of the manor was confirmed in 1388/9, and again in 1397/8.

In 1479, Thomas Douse of Esshetisford made the following bequest in his will: 'to light the High Cross all the money that cometh from my shop called the CAGE above the rent and reparation and for evermore'. There was also a bequest to 'John my servant part of

<sup>1</sup> Juliana de Leybourne's Ashford manor house is thought to be the site known as Parsonage Barn (N.G.R. TR 013 434). By entry in the Fine Rolls 13 Jan. 41. Edward III (138) the manor of Ashford was farmed with its house, granges, dovecotes, granaries, stables, cow-house and water-mill, dykes, sewers, waterways and the enclosure of the manor. Also in the Cal. Inq. Mis. in 1376 there was a garden called Mottesgarden containing 2 acres. - (Dr. H.F.C. Lansberry). In 1978, Mr. Brian Philp and the Kent Archaeological Rescue Unit made a limited excavation of the site (limited by the pending housing development). Some foundations of stone buildings were discovered. On the west side was an entrance causeway; the site was rectangular with very wet moats on the north, south and east sides.



East End of Middle Row, showing High Street and Drinking Fountain.



Market Hall, 1602

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my shop that belongeth to the Barbor's craft'.<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that in the eighteenth century a court record refers to a part of the premises still being used as a barber's shop.<sup>3</sup> In 1540, James Lucas of Asshetisford left £4 'to make a common well in Asshetisford Street at the back-side of the CAGE for poor people'.<sup>4</sup> Possibly this well was situated under the columned section of the eastern part of the building. However, Robert Furley, the Ashford historian, states that the Town Pump was east of Thompson's shop.<sup>5</sup> A drinking fountain, which replaced an old pump, was given to the town by Furley but no longer exists (Plate III).

The high quality of the workmanship in the medieval section of the premises shows that the building was one of some importance. What was its function apart from sheltering a small prison-cell? From its situation on the northern side of the market-place, there is a strong possibility that it was a market-hall or court-hall. The structure has strong similarities to the market-halls such as at Titchfield (to be seen at the Weald and Downland Open Museum at Singleton, W. Sussex), Fordwich town hall and Milton Regis court hall, all of which have cages. The use of the ground-floor as shops and the upper floor reserved for a grander purpose such as a meeting-place in medieval halls seems to support the theory.<sup>6</sup>

The eastern section of the building with its square-section panels points to early sixteenth-century work. This enlargement may have coincided with the time when the shops, referred to earlier, were being built in the market-place, i.e. between 1512 and 1538 while the manor was under the lordship of the Crown until the Dissolution.

In or about 1602, a new market and court-hall were built some fifty yards to the west in the High Street in the area which Furley ascribes to the fish and corn market (Plate IV). A wall still exists within the present parade of shops on the site inscribed with the words '1602 God seet'. Did the building under discussion become inadequate as a market and court-hall as suggested, and it became necessary to erect a new one? In any case, there seems to have been a change of use when the tenancy of the Cage at this time was held by one George Colt, a woollen draper, who appears to have been responsible for the radical reconstruction of the premises. He does not appear to have been an Ashford man, nor do we know when he arrived, but his son

<sup>2</sup> Arthur Hussey, *Ashford Wills*, 1938, 37.

<sup>3</sup> Original copyhold document. See note 8.

<sup>4</sup> Hussey, *op. cit.* in note 2.

<sup>5</sup> Robert Furley, 'The early History of Ashford', *Arch. Cant.*, xvi (1886), 161-78.

<sup>6</sup> S.E. Rigold, 'Two Types of Court Hall', *Arch. Cant.*, lxxxiii (1968), 1-22

<sup>7</sup> Furley, *op. cit.* in note 5.

John was baptised at Ashford on 23rd December, 1632. The family seems to have become integrated into the town life, marrying into other prosperous families such as Greenhills (tanners), Apsleys (linen drapers) and Bowyers (haberdashers).

Further details of the Colt family history are beyond the scope of this contribution, but interest in the property continues with a court record of 1736, in which 'Elizabeth Coutts, wife of James Coutts of Ashford, Barber . . . surrenders unto the Lord of the said manor . . . one shop with one cellar under the same shop, one chamber over the same called the Cage containing in length Sixteen feet and in breadth Thirteen feet . . . abutting the Copyhold Lands formerly Henry Gibbs there towards the East to Copyhold Lands late Margaret Snoad's there towards the South and towards the King's Highway there towards the West and North'.<sup>8</sup>

In the nineteenth century the premises, together with the buildings built up on the south side of the Cage, were occupied first by Elliott the printer, and later by the Thompson family, printers, jewellers and silversmiths. The photograph (Plate II) shows the Victorian shop-front, which was to last, with only minor alterations until the refurbishment in 1982. The Cage has been awarded a 'Historic Building of Kent' Plaque by the Kent Historic Buildings Committee of the Kent Archaeological Society. The restored building constitutes a significant feature in the Ashford town-centre.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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<sup>8</sup> The copyhold document is in the possession of Mr. W. James Thompson of Ashford, a descendant of the family firm of printers who occupied the premises.