OXFORDSHIRE BUILDINGS RECORD REPORT OBR.20

Field barns at Rowstock

Introduction

The Oxfordshire Buildings Record are grateful to Mr Stuart Brookes for pointing out the potential significance of these buildings, and to Mr Nigel Hammond for additional information. We were able to spend about an hour recording the two eastern barns on 4 August 2003.

Location (SU 474 895)

There are three barns just off a trackway which runs west-east through the former orchard to the north of the Wantage Road (A 417) in the area known as Quab Hill. This was at one time an extensive fruit growing area, but the orchards shown in the OS map as recently as 1979 (and reprinted in the 1988 edition) have now been replaced by grain crops. For ease of reference, these are referred to as barns 1,2 and 3, running from east to west. There are, we understand, two further, identical barns, one converted to a house, and another near Steventon House was used as an apple store by Midwinter Orchards from the 1920s. These were not investigated.

Figure 1 Barn 1 from the NE, July 2003

External description

The three barns are virtually identical. Their alignments to the trackway are slightly different, but in general they are oriented SE-NW, with two wide doorways to the SW and a five-sided porch to the NE. In the porch, the doorway is on the northern face, and there is a window in the NE.

Materials

The walling material is factory made red brick, laid in stretcher bond, with blue rounded bricks at the jambs of the SW doorways. For the porch, the quoins are made with shaped bricks with 135° angles. The roof is of softwood, with a central king-post truss, and with large gablets at either end filled with wooden slats. The roof covering is thatch, apparently water-reed, and is pegged to the rafters with metal hooks. The roofs of barns 1 and 3 have almost completely lost their covering, but the central one, barn 2, is weatherproof, with an aluminium foil layer between the thatch and the rafters. The floors are modern concrete.

Internal description

The barns are virtually empty, some of the windows and the porch doors in barn 1 are intact, but none of the larger doors survives. Between the porch and the barn proper, barn 1 has a galvanized metal water tank above the doorway. The walls have been whitewashed to floor level within the porch and within the main space from 5'4" above floor level. Below this, there is 2' of concrete render along the wall opposite the large doorways, which extends 5'6" towards the doorways along the gable walls, and evidence of some structure below this which has now been removed. Vertical water pipes remain at the ends nearest the doorway to the porch.

Figure 2 Barn 1 interior facing NE showing door to porch, water tank above, concrete splash-back and water pipe

In barn 1, there are wooden artefacts piled in the porch, some of which may be relevant to the former uses of the building. In the main space are some broken splay ladders typical of the region, longer examples of which are associated with the cherry-picking industry for which the Harwell area was renowned.

A measured drawing of barn 1 is attached at Annex 1.

Documentary material

Nothing found as yet

Figure 3 Interior of porch

Oral evidence

Following a query to Nigel Hammond, the latter responded as follows: "Henry Midwinter says: There were five identical barns built 1910 by Sir Mortimore Singer (sewing machines) who took over Milton Hill House. They were built as shelters for his brood mares on his newly established stud farm. The splash backs inside served as the mangers for the horses! The three barns near the Wantage road are ruinous but did have planning permission for conversion to holiday homes, and he thinks are owned by Patrick Gale of Manor Farm Appleford."

Analysis and interpretation

Original build, form and function

From the above, it seems clear that these buildings were built for a stud farm in the early 20th century, and served as feeding and watering centres rather than as stables, foaling houses, or anything normally associated with horse rearing. As such, they are an interesting reflection of a vernacular style adapted to this function. The thatched roofs, in particular, are strikingly 'local' in this respect, even if the brickwork is factory produced and functional.

Later building history

The area in which the barns stand was an orchard for most of the 20th century, so the buildings seem to have been converted to storage facilities from an early date. The mangers would have been removed, and the ladders and produce stored there instead.

Conclusions

This group of buildings seems to be a unique survival of an innovative facility for use in horse breeding, which then was converted to fruit farm use. More work perhaps needs to be done to see how unique these buildings are, and the (probably short) life of the stud farm needs investigating.

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Bibliography

Hammond, Nigel (1993) *Rural Life in the Vale of White Horse 1780-1914* (Rectory Orchard Books, West Hanney)