

# ***THE OXON RECORDER***

***Issue 14***

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## **A Great Year Ahead**

As I write this, spring is in the air, and the countryside is greening. With our stock of recording equipment and an ever-increasing membership, we can look forward to getting out and about to explore, discover and record the buildings of our towns and countryside. In this edition of the Recorder (for which I am standing in as temporary editor until a successor volunteers to take over the sterling work which Gillian Harrison has put in over the past two years) I hope you will find something which attracts you. The Burford Project with the Victoria County History is continuing, the Farm Buildings Survey will be getting into gear, and volunteers are needed to help sort through the South Oxfordshire District Council building control files which were rescued from the shredder in March.

## **Annual General Meeting**

This year's AGM will be held on Sunday, 18 May, at Mapledurham. Bridget Rudge has organised a 'great day out', which is not to be missed. We will be the guests of Dan Miles, known, I hope, to most of you as our leading dendrochronologist, but also a carpenter of repute, and someone who is passionate about understanding, conserving and restoring the historic buildings of our county. There will be opportunities to see his workshop, visit the historic mill and for those with higher-status interests, Mapledurham House, the home of the Eystons.

## **Burford Project**

Another successful day's work was done in Burford on 15 March, with the basic recording work on some further blocks of tenements on High Street, Sheep Street and Witney Street being completed. One focus of the work which had developed since the previous visit was the recognition of seven different stone walling techniques in the houses and boundary walls of the town, ranging from drystone walling to finely cut ashlar. Examination of old photographs, such as those from the Henry Taunt archive now available on-line at [www.english-heritage.org.uk/viewfinder](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/viewfinder), or in hard copy or microfiche form at the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies, shows that many of the 'traditional' Cotswold stone houses of Burford were limewashed or rendered in the 1890s, and so one of our tasks is to try to understand where the boundary between these walling types lay, in date, status or fashion.

The next recording day in Burford will be on Saturday 3 May, starting at 0930 with a coffee and briefing at Cob House, by kind invitation of Raymond and Joan Moody. All those who have already contributed to this work will be reminded nearer the time, but if anyone else would like to come, please let me know on 01865 516414 or [david.clark3@which.net](mailto:david.clark3@which.net) before Easter if possible.

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## **Other events for your diary**

### **14 June: Open day at Oxford Castle 10-4pm**

Another chance to see the progress which is being made to convert the former prison into an hotel, with an associated heritage interpretation centre sponsored by the Oxford Preservation Trust. At the time of writing, further planning applications have been put in to increase the number of hotel rooms, and change the uses of some parts of the complex. Come and see for yourself what the issues are in this very important part of the history of the city and county.

### **28 June: New Perspectives on Chiltern Landscapes**

This day conference will focus on the historic environment of the Chilterns, with contributions from Tom Williamson on the designed landscapes of the area, Jeremy Lake on traditional buildings and settlements, James Moir on buildings archaeology, and Barbara Wallis on the involvement of volunteers in research and care of the historic environment. West Wycombe Park and Greys Court will be featured case-studies. For further details ring 01844 271300 or e-mail [office@chilternsaonb.org](mailto:office@chilternsaonb.org)

### **7 October: Beauty, Utility and Profit – the English Model Farm and Agricultural History**

Susanna Wade-Martins, whose book on the English Model Farm came out last year, will give the annual OBR lecture to the OAHS at Rewley House, at 5.30pm. There were a number of agricultural initiatives in Oxfordshire which might be called model farms, but what exactly were these, and what part did they play in the wider development of agriculture in the 19<sup>th</sup> century? Details on [www.oahs.org.uk](http://www.oahs.org.uk)

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## **SODC Building Control Plans - weeding before mass destruction**

One of the ways in which plans of buildings enter the public domain is through their submission for approval under the building regulations. We were informed last year that the entire collection of such plans for South Oxfordshire was scheduled for destruction. Carl Boardman, the County Archivist, and his staff, made a selection from the vast quantity of material which filled some 500 boxes and, under the Damocletian sword of a March 11th deadline, a gang of four - Dan Miles, Mike Evans, your secretary and his wife, descended on the remaining stockpile of boxes on St David's Day in order to select such records as might be saved from the shredder.



The problem – SODC building control files ready for destruction

We slaved over a hotbed of social history, of failed dreams of new bungalows rejected in the wooded Chiltern foothills, to the successful creations of Legoland housing estates on the edges of Didcot and Wallingford. We noted the gradual demise of the 'sun-room' and the corresponding rise of the 'conservatory' in the aspirations of the nouveaux riches, as well as the inevitable garages, their proponents perhaps not realising that these were destined to house the family junk rather than the new car, which as we now know is too much of a lifestyle statement to be shut away from public gaze. Our main aim, however, was to save the plans from before 1948, on the basis that thereafter, any important material would still exist within the planning files - until these, too, succumb to SODC's grim shredder.

In the end we got the heap down to about 20 boxes, which are now in Dan's garage. Over the next few months these will be further examined for material of importance, probably focussing on plans of new buildings built before 1948, and alterations to older buildings, particularly listed ones. We will also be looking for farm buildings, of course.

This episode has highlighted the need for overall policies in relation to the storage/destruction of this sort of paperwork. We understand that none of the material we saw at Wallingford has been recorded digitally or microfiched. The quantities involved are so large that county and national records offices would be overwhelmed if they all arrived in one go for processing and storage. On the other hand, piecemeal *ad hoc* destruction over the years would have significantly diminished the value and interest of this collection. Mike Evans, in his 'day job' as head of archives at the National Monuments Record at Swindon is giving serious thought to these issues and is hoping to mount a national project to develop appropriate policies. I'm sure he found his time at Wallingford valuable for the insights it offered into the issues and possibilities involved. As a post-script, we have recently learned that the Planning files from SODC are now being prepared for destruction, so the cycle starts again!

For students of 'low-road' architecture, the Station Road West estate itself, where the plans were kept, provided a happy hunting ground. Clustered round the water tower which is such a landmark for those entering Wallingford from the west, it is a collection of breeze-block and other cheap material structures, on what was perhaps the cattle yards for the former Wallingford station. These buildings can now house business activities on the lowest margins of profitability, allowing them a chance to develop without the burden of high rents. Most of the buildings, however, seemed closed, but one, a garage, was a hive of activity all morning. The silence in the

afternoon was palpable. Our own site, Unit 9, was just one large space, with three small rooms at one end, including ladies' and gents' toilets (none operational). Ivy was beginning to encroach through a broken window in the gents' loo. Outside, there were other storage spaces, and various heaps of architectural material, pallets of early Victorian bricks, some flints, sundry stones and a stack of coping bricks. Where were these from, and to whom did they belong? Perhaps no-one will ever know, and they, too will be lost as in due course the development potential of this site for housing is realised, everything is bulldozed into foundation rubble, and the small businesses are forced off into some other site on the margins of past prosperity.

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## **VAG Winter Conference, London 14-15 December 2002**

The theme of the conference was 'News from the Regions', the subtext being to bring together representatives of active groups and individuals who are recording and analysing vernacular buildings. Questions such as whether groups have 'research agendas', or whether recording is random; and the integration of the building recording with the work of other groups on landscape, social and economic history which are highly relevant to what the OBR is doing, were raised and discussed. The purpose of this short report is to try to place the work of the OBR in this wider context.

In the opening contribution, Adam Longcroft described the work of the Norfolk Historic Buildings Group, founded just a few months before the OBR, and now with 230 members. As well as 'recording days', they have a winter programme of lectures, and in summer organise training sessions and group visits to buildings of interest. Much of their recording is 'random', and in many cases, people logging on to their website 'offer' houses for recording by the group. Like our own activities in Burford, they are also focussing on a particular place, New Buckenham, a Norman 'failed town', but, being small, they hope to survey all the earliest survivals over a five-year period. Active co-operation with the local history society was seen as a key factor in getting this off the ground.

Ideas which they are pursuing include the setting up of a church recording sub-group, with the aim, *inter alia* of providing material for improved church guides; they also have an aim to produce a local (Norfolk) version of the handbook on 'fixtures and fittings in dated buildings', and to find suitable candidates for dendrochronology, so that some firm dates can be put on various types of structure. They are also starting to think about patterns of survival, and to tie these in to the social and economic background of the area.

A quite different approach had been taken in Somerset, where a small group (50 people, of whom 12 are regular recorders) has been operating from the 1970s researching the county's buildings, doing about 40 buildings a year, and publishing village surveys, 8 to date. They are also working with their local Victoria County History editor on the study of a particular village for a forthcoming volume. With the large number of surveyed buildings, their database is essential to ensure that re-surveys are avoided, or take earlier work into account. The main difference from Norfolk was that the Somerset group did not see themselves as having a wider

educational role.

On the Saturday evening I was able to give a short account of some of the similarities and differences between the OBR and the other groups, and as a result I feel we are moving in the right direction, but need to encourage more 'small team recording', outside the OBR recording days, either of hitherto unexamined houses, or of agricultural buildings, which we have identified as a focus for a wider research programme.

Most of the other contributions took the form of reports on what people and groups were doing and what they had found. What emerged was a picture of continual discovery, and how it is possible by close and thoughtful examination, to update and revise earlier orthodoxies. John McCormack showed how he had now revised some of his work of the 1980s on Guernsey houses, having realised that he had overlooked the significance of chamber blocks and open halls with stone fireplaces in the wall. The value of dendrochronology in establishing dates had naturally caused some re-thinking, and Edward Roberts and Linda Hall working in Hampshire had found crown-post roofs and clasped purlin roofs at the same date (1340), and were producing chronologies for door frames and fireplaces which showed the dangers of dating using only standard stylistic criteria.

A number of contributions emphasised that we had to go beyond recording and try to analyse and interpret the building, and set it in context relative to others in the area or elsewhere. We need to ask continually, whether what we are looking at is common in the area or rare, and not only what we see but what is missing. Try to do a conjectural phased reconstruction - a sketch will do, but it is a good discipline. Even better is to commit oneself to publication - nothing else focusses the mind on what is really going on.

Finally, a couple of points which relate to our own work over the past year. You may recall that we found some odd marks on a timber in a barn in Hill Farm, Little Wittenham. Having showed these to VAG members, the consensus appears to be that these are Baltic timber marks. No-one has yet made a comprehensive study of these marks, and we do not know where in the process of conversion or shipping they were put on and why. Cathy Groves of the Sheffield University dendro lab is, however, developing an interest in the dating of softwood, and is starting to collect records of these marks, so watch this space.

Secondly, we have also noted the numerous examples of bent 'inner principals' in the south east of the county. I have now seen illustrations of examples in other parts of England, and our Chairman has pointed out their ubiquity in Northamptonshire. However, there do appear to be variations in these examples, and perhaps a need to clarify the terminology used to describe these roof structures. This could well be a focus of some of our farm building work – see below. **If anyone wants to do a research project on this topic, let me know.**

I think that all this demonstrates that we need to keep in constant touch with what is going on elsewhere, and where the subject is going nationally. If you would like to join the VAG, do ask me for a form. Finally, and here is something to concentrate the mind, I was asked whether Oxfordshire would like to host a VAG conference at some

future date. The VAG visited us last in 1987, when Chris Currie had completed his work in the Vale of White Horse, and there were some other recently recorded houses available to visit. We would need to have done quite a lot more work before taking this up, but it is not impossible, and we have a lot to show already. Shall we go for it?

David Clark

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## Chiltern Open Air Museum

It is still not too late to join our visit to the Chiltern Open Air Museum on 12 April. Full details were given in the previous edition of the newsletter, but if you have lost this, or did not get one, contact Bridget Rudge (Church Farm House, Church Lane, Dry Sandford, Abingdon OX13 6JP or 01865 390474)

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## Oxfordshire Farm Buildings Survey

Towards the end of 2002, the OBR committee agreed to try to mount a broad overview survey of the farm buildings of Oxfordshire so as to create a resource for historical research and to make a start on understanding the nature of the building stock for further study in particular areas.

### Background

There is no comprehensive study of the agricultural buildings of Oxfordshire. A number of buildings were recorded some time ago and the results deposited in the SMR. We have been given a list of these, which will form the basis of a county-wide database, and also allows us to avoid re-recording them. However, planning applications to convert barns and other structures to other uses continue to appear as pressures on farming increase. It seems timely, therefore, to carry out some sort of survey of these structures in order to inform owners, planners and those interested in historic farm buildings generally, about the traditional building types to be found in the county, and how they were used during the changes in agriculture since they were built.

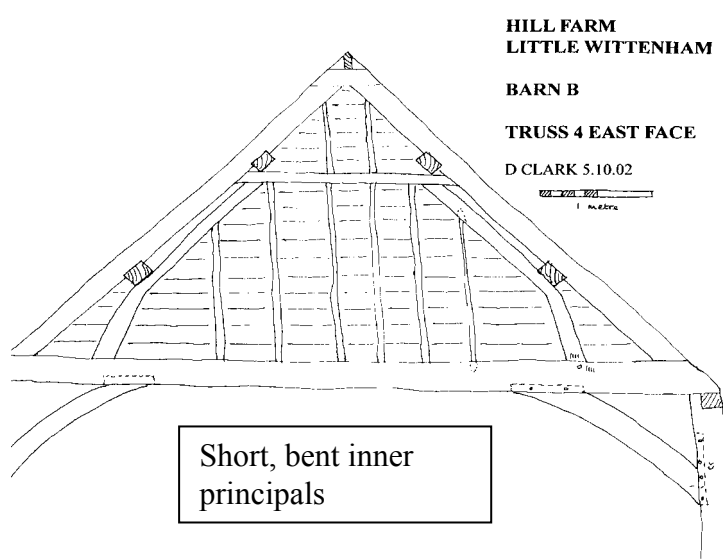
Top Barn at Walcot, near Charlbury - derelict in 2003



**Date Range:** following the lead of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England survey, *English Farmsteads, 1750-1914* (1997), a cut-off date of 1914 is suggested. However, it cannot be assumed that buildings built before 1750 are all recorded and understood, so the Oxfordshire survey should not restrict itself to a start-date, but aim to record any early structure not hitherto recorded.

**Building Types:** Recognising that there are individuals and groups with specific interests (eg dovecots, bee-boles) it is suggested that the survey concentrates on the main structures of the farmstead, eg. barns, shelter-sheds, byres, stables, pigsties, granaries, and on the inter-relationship of these on working farms. However, field barns and other isolated structures are also vulnerable, and should be covered.

**Structural features:** There is a growing recognition that nineteenth century farm buildings can have innovative roof structures with a regional identity. New words are having to be coined to describe them – see Campbell, J W P 'Naming the parts of post-medieval roof structures' in *Vernacular Architecture* 31 (2000), pp.45-51. An area of particular interest in Oxfordshire is the short bent inner principal, found, it is thought, only in agricultural buildings in the Vale of White Horse and in the south-east of the county. We recorded some, probably mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, at Hill Farm, Little Wittenham, last summer, which looked like this:



As you can see, these timbers rise from the tie-beam to the collar, and support a purlin; they are not to be confused with 'inset principals' seen in Warwickshire houses, or similar structures associated with dropped tie-beams in stables in Oxfordshire, Berkshire and Wiltshire. What is the distribution of these? When do they appear, and how long did the style last? What purpose

did they have in barns? These are some of the questions we would like to answer. But first we need some facts: **please try to find examples, and if possible a date, and the type of building you found it in.**

### Other ways you can contribute

We are at a very early stage in this, and are trying out a number of approaches. In some parishes, members of OBR are trying to involve the local history society, while elsewhere, individual members are attempting to do some recording on their own. Obviously, the task is potentially enormous, but as the Chinese proverb has it, the longest journey begins with a single step. **I would like every OBR member to take one first step, by going out one day this summer to a local farm (with at least one pre-1914 building) and doing some simple recording of the site and main buildings.**

Here is a suggested way forward:

1. Identify a farmstead which you think might have suitable buildings, and which is accessible by footpath or public road.

2. Make a copy of the relevant part of the 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1:2500 OS map to show the layout in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.
3. Visit the farm and complete a short checklist of information, see below.
4. Ring the doorbell and say you are doing a farm building survey for the Oxfordshire Buildings Record and would very much like to see the roof structures of the barns/stables/cowsheds etc on the farm. Offer a further visit at a more convenient time, if necessary. Ask if they have any deeds or other records of the property, while you are there, and of course if the farmhouse is interesting, take a look at that as well.
5. When you get home, do any follow-up needed, and complete a short report on what you have found
6. Please send any material to David Clark in the first instance. (21 Walton Street, Oxford OX1 2HQ)

### Checklist

- Name of Farm:
- Grid Reference:
- Parish:
- Brief description of each building: (eg Barn, weatherboarded, hipped roof, plain tiles; two pairs opposing doors, queen-post roof)
- Approximate dates of buildings:
- Sketch plan of layout, with north point:
- Photographs taken:

Some documentary material would be helpful, for example:

- 1<sup>st</sup> edition 1:2500 OS map
- If the building is listed, a copy of the description ([www.imagesofengland.org.uk](http://www.imagesofengland.org.uk) will give this)
- Other references might include the VCH, Buildings of England, local parish history, etc.

Another form of recording which I have tried is the cycle tour with notebook, in order to eliminate farmsteads from the survey; cycling is one of the least threatening and intrusive methods of getting about the countryside. On one of the fine days at the end of March, I went west from Eynsham, and was able from the path to eliminate four farmsteads as being entirely late 20<sup>th</sup> century, one as having been entirely converted to non-agricultural use, and one a potential for further investigation. **How easy would it be to cover a whole parish in this way?**

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The OBR acknowledges the help of Awards for All in supporting our work to record the built heritage of Oxfordshire.