

THE OXON RECORDER

Issue 21

Winter 2004/5



Reminder on contents of this issue, so you can come back later for more information

Visit to Michelmersh Brickworks August 16th 2005 - flier enclosed **FILLING FAST**

Presentation Day in Radley - A report from our Chairman

Vernacular Buildings and the **Hearth Tax** – reviews and ideas from conference in Oxford

Old Wine in New Bottles – an unusual re-use of old technology

Could it be you? Request for new auditor

New VCH Witney Volume with **SPECIAL OFFER** for OBR members

Recording Buildings in Oxford City – an invitation – flier enclosed



Editorial Comment

I confess I was disappointed with the last issue of *Oxon Recorder*. Not with the contents, but the quality of reproduction. Oxfordshire Buildings Record are eternally grateful to The Oxford Preservation Trust for allowing us to use their photocopier without charge, for an organisation of our size does not have the funds to sustain an 8-page quarterly newsletter any other way. But photocopying is never the ideal reproducing agent, especially for photographs. The format of *Oxon Recorder* on double-sided A3 paper necessitates making a series of photocopied master A3's from my computer print-out A4's, then the A3's are re-photocopied for your edition. Though I was pleased with the original print-out quality, after successive photocopy processes, definition and contrast had disappeared, despite adjustments and advice from all at OPT. With further advice from members and experiments at a local copyshop, I trust this edition looks better, but I won't know until too late! Here's hoping.....

Heather Horner

Our Chairman John Steane caught in a characteristic pose, Princes Manor Farm, Harwell, August 2004

Presentation Day 13th November 2004

For those members who find they cannot fit in visiting all the buildings with which the group get involved, Presentation Day is a chance to catch up on the year's activities. A report from our Chairman.

It was a bright November Day when twenty five members assembled in the Church Rooms at Radley, responding to the invitation of the Radley History Society Buildings Recording Group. We had a rich programme of activities to enjoy. First was a delightful walk round the church, next door to the hall. The unusual late medieval arcade of octagonal wooden posts between nave and aisle, early 17th century choir stalls, said to have come from Cologne, and a magnificent collection of heraldic glass were among the prize delights. After the church, we descended upon the vicarage; the vicar couldn't have been more welcoming, despite the fact that she had only been in post for three weeks! The Radley members took us round this complex jettied timber framed building, pointing out its puzzles and architectural anomalies; members found it difficult to believe the house had ever been a hunting lodge.

We then lunched in the hall before embarking on a series of presentations by our members. We heard a report on the Vicarage, and the Abingdon Group told us about their discoveries and field work, illustrated by photographs mounted on card. Our Secretary and Chairman summarized the results of recording days during 2004, and gave an update on the farm buildings survey and recording project that OBR are currently engaged in. Tea with an excellent selection of donated cakes completed a most enjoyable and stimulating afternoon. Many thanks to all contributors and participants.

With the membership standing at 122, it is clear that the Oxfordshire Buildings Record is well and truly launched. The work at Abingdon, Radley and Harwell was of a high order worthy of a wider readership. Short reports of our recording work are beginning to appear in such journals as *South Midlands Archaeology* and *Vernacular Architecture*.

John Steane

Vernacular Buildings and the Hearth Tax 29-31 October 2004, Rewley House, Oxford.

A report from David Hughes

The Vernacular Architecture Group's October Conference at Rewley House was held in conjunction with OUDCE and The Centre for Hearth Tax Studies, Roehampton. The 80 attendees were treated to a fascinating review of the Hearth Tax and how this could be used as an additional source of information in understanding buildings. Our introduction to the subject included a review of the introduction of the Tax in 1662 and the changes implemented by Parliament to try to increase the revenue, until its demise in 1689. We also heard of the exemptions from the Tax, i.e. occupiers of houses worth less than 20/- per annum, that showed they were as reluctant to pay as council taxpayers are 340 years later. It became clear that to understand the Hearth Tax one needs to look carefully at both the Tax return and the exemptions.

We then toured the country reviewing the Hearth Tax returns and their related buildings through 10 counties, starting in Kent, Norfolk and Cambridgeshire, travelling north to Yorkshire, Durham, Northumberland and Cumbria and then back south again to Warwickshire and Dorset. Finally the returns for the cities of Bristol and London were discussed. From the analysis of the returns the number of non-exempt 1 hearth houses was typically between 65% and 90% of the total houses. In many counties it has been possible to confirm the number of hearths in a particular house through comparison with probate inventories for the occupiers of that house. Of even more interest was the identification of houses and occupiers in the Hearth Tax with surviving houses; this greatly increases our understanding of the development of houses, as it gives us a snap shot in time of the status of the house during the Hearth Tax period.

By the end of the conference it was clear that with careful study of the returns and exemptions a distribution of house types and the wealth of households, in a region, may be established and that specific information about surviving houses might be discovered. From the information presented by the speakers it became clear that the Hearth Tax returns for Oxfordshire have not yet been analysed in this way. This may be an opportunity for members of the OBR to add to our knowledge of the buildings in the county, in any case we should not overlook the value of the Hearth Tax records when studying a particular building from the 17th century.

David Hughes

More impressions from the same conference from Heather Horner

With nearly 20 speakers, this conference was densely packed with information, much of it in a documentary form unfamiliar to students of vernacular buildings. Several speakers were at pains to point out that these documents were not compiled for historians, and that it was vital to understand their shortcomings, particularly the various and changing nature of ‘exemptions’. There were a lot of statistical analyses of the Hearth Tax Returns, and I have to say some of them seemed to go beyond what the data warranted. Again, it is becoming evident that relating Hearth Tax Returns to the state of the housing stock should be by geographical areas of farming land, rather than whole counties, which all cross geological boundaries. After all, ‘counties’ were originally defined to include many land types, giving access to the widest possible range of goods and services.

As David has pointed out (above) there could be scope for identifying specific standing buildings in Oxfordshire, and this is being attempted in the VCH Burford research that OBR are involved in, in conjunction with transcriptions of wills and inventories contemporary with the Hearth Tax. There is a slim chance of identifying some of the larger houses, if the relatively small proportion of wills with inventories that survive happen to be from individuals named in the Hearth Tax Returns. Sadly, none but the 1662 Returns for Oxfordshire survive, and in those there are no records of the ‘exempt’ hearths, which were frequently the small houses we are interested in.

And more personal speculations derived from the same conference

The overall message that I took away from this very stimulating event was a personal resolution to question every building for evidence of climate change. The pioneering landscape historian W. G. Hoskins was the first to point out in the 1960’s the evidence contained in documents of the 16th and 17th centuries that yields of wheat were falling, whilst acreages of cold-resistant oats and rye increased, though he had no explanation at the time. He also used the phrase ‘The Great Rebuilding’ to describe the apparent improvement in the housing stock of England, attributed to increasing prosperity.

I can well remember my excitement in the 1980’s as climate historians first described how they had developed techniques for examining pollen cores and ice cores to reveal evidence of ‘The Little Ice Age’ of the 16th and 17th centuries, coeval with the crop changes, and at the time I annotated an earlier article by Hoskins to that effect.

We are all in this day and age acutely aware of the effects of climate change. What if the evidence emerging from the Hearth Tax returns is simply reflecting people’s reactions to a colder climate? Rather than using your fire just for cooking, with the limited smoke escaping through a louvre or a hood, if you now need to keep a blaze going to survive, you find some way to make life more comfortable – you build a chimney. Just as a government sees, say, the invention of the motorcar and quickly sees a new way to raise tax revenue, seeing chimneys increase must have rung the same money bells. And what about access to increased fuel requirements? How much did this contribute to the demise of the English forest, or the pressure for enclosure, or the growth of coal as a fuel? What proportion of income had to go on fuel, and how far did it contribute to poverty? Was there really A

Great Rebuilding due to increased prosperity, or was it just a necessity for survival in a cold climate? I'd love to open a discussion – let's hear your views.

Heather Horner

Old Wine in New Bottles

A very interesting reuse of old technology to overcome a structural problem has been observed in a cottage in East Hendred. Yew Tree Cottage is a one and a half storey, two bay, detached dwelling of timber frame construction beneath a thatched roof. The nature of the framing suggests a late 17th building date.

During the intervening centuries the property has been altered and extended. In particular, in the 19th century, the principle elevation was rebuilt in brickwork and the eaves height was raised to a full two storeys. The problem the builders faced was how to integrate the differing opposing eaves heights with the least disruption to the gable trusses.

This was resolved by the use of base crucks resting on the existing wall-plate and supporting the truss upon an extended collar. A higher wall-plate rests on the "elbow" of the crucks and this supports the rafters which have a slightly shallower pitch than the original. Externally, the difference in the roof pitch is masked by the thatch as the thickness has been adjusted to produce a level roof surface.

This interesting re-use of old carpentry practise suggests to me that although such techniques may have been discarded in favour of more "modern" systems of timber framing, the fundamentals and principles of cruck framing were still appreciated and understood to be utilised when needed.



Base cruck used to raise eaves height



Unaltered end of same truss

Tony Blay

Could it be you?

The OBR will need a new auditor from early 2006. Martin Greenwood, who has audited our accounts since the OBR was founded, will be standing down. It is an important job, although it requires only a small amount of time once a year. As our affairs are simple the auditor does not need to have any particular financial experience, and Martin will be happy to take his successor through the process he uses when he does his last audit for us early next year.

If you might be interested in taking this on please contact the Treasurer, Jessica Brod, 13 The Farthings, Marcham, Abingdon OX13 6QD, or alternatively the Secretary (contact details at end).

Witney's Buildings and the VCH

In October the latest Victoria County History volume (*VCH Oxfordshire XIV*) was published, focussing on the planned medieval town of Witney and its neighbouring townships of Hailey, Crawley, and Curbridge. A review will appear in a future Newsletter – the following note, by contrast, is an unashamedly partisan *precis* by the VCH County Editor of the volume's treatment of Witney's buildings.

Probably the single greatest strength of the VCH's approach to building history is that buildings can be examined in their full historical context, and the current volume is no exception. As well as a discrete buildings section contributed by Nicholas Cooper, the VCH account includes detailed examination of the town's origins and physical development, of its economic history (including the rise and fall of its world-famous cloth and blanket industry), and of its social, political, and religious history – all underpinning the discussion of its surviving buildings. In addition, the VCH's archival research allowed much to be said about demolished buildings, while study of probate inventories contributed to discussion of house plans, room-use, and furnishings.

In contrast with Oxfordshire towns such as Burford or Thame, most of Witney's surviving buildings are post-medieval, a symptom of the town's economic success as its cloth and blanket industry expanded from the 16th and 17th centuries. This seems to have prompted wholesale rebuilding, with very few pre-17th-century survivals discovered behind more recent façades. By then the town was primarily stone-built, and may have been so in the Middle Ages, though the low survival-rate of medieval buildings makes generalization difficult. Stone and slate were plentifully available, while substantial early buildings such as the bishop of Winchester's medieval manor house near the church (the so-called bishop's palace) were stone-built from the outset. On the other hand, though only fragments of late medieval timber framing have been found, some quite substantial houses were evidently timber-framed, among them a demolished building with jetties on the site of the modern Corn Exchange, which may have formed part of a 16th-century mansion house owned by the Yate family, wealthy clothiers. In the early 19th century most rubble buildings were rendered and covered with pale yellow or ochre limewash, a few scraps of which survive.



Demolished house facing Market Square

Given the VCH's timescale and resources, full OBR-style survey-work was not generally possible, though a large cross-section of buildings was investigated. Larger 16th-century houses include Nos. 3-5 Church Green (The Hermitage), with its carved doorhead dated 1564, and Nos. 23-5 Church Green,

rebuilt by Corpus Christi College in the 1520s; documentary evidence confirms that Church Green was a preferred location for many of the town's wealthier inhabitants by the 16th century. Later grander houses followed national stylistic trends, the gabled elevations of Nos. 3-5 High Street (built in the 17th century for the Gunn family, local clothiers) being superseded by the classical symmetry of the Grammar School (1660), No. 2 Market Square (dated 1715), or the rectory house (1721-3). Cottage- and working-class accommodation is also discussed. Documentary evidence traces the processes of subdivision and the building up of back plots as population rose from the 16th century, culminating in the cramped and unsavoury cottage yards of the mid 19th century. Most were swept away by 20th-century slum clearance, but 19th-century UDC minutes provide graphic depictions of the crowded and insanitary conditions, marked by inadequate ventilation and overflowing privies. As well as housing, the VCH examines public buildings such as the town hall, the Blanket Hall, and the Corn Exchange, while ecclesiastical buildings include the medieval parish church, with its side altars and chantry chapels, and the numerous nonconformist chapels which characterized the town from the 17th and 18th centuries.

(right) Cape Terrace, built in 1865

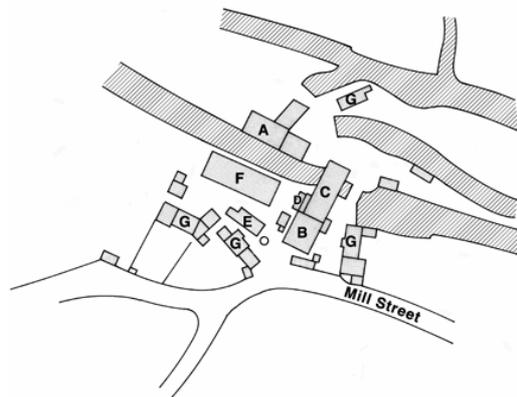


Just as important are the town's industrial buildings. Until the late 18th century the only mechanized premises were water-powered fulling mills on the river Windrush, among them New Mill (near Hailey), Witney Mills (on Mill Street), and Farm Mill (near Church Green), all of whose histories and buildings are discussed. Weaving and storage was at first mostly concentrated in general-purpose outbuildings erected on back plots, of which the best surviving example, rather larger than most, is the former blanket factory at Nos.

55-6 West End. The introduction of the factory system by the 1830s led to new, purpose-built, but still unmechanized factories, such as a surviving building at Woodgreen, three-storeyed with uniform rows of arched-headed windows, and with loading doors on each floor. Only after the opening of the railway in 1861 did fully integrated mill sites emerge, in particular Charles Early's Witney Mills on Mill Street, which reached its modern extent through piecemeal accretion and rebuilding, some of it precipitated by all-too-frequent fires. The first factory to be conceived from the outset as a modern integrated site was Mount Mills, built next to the railway station in 1899-1900 to designs by J. Kirk & Sons of Dewsbury, and constructed principally of brick and steel. Crofts Mill, built in 1931-3 for the Yorkshire firm of J Walker & Sons, was similar.



Factory at Wood Green, now converted into housing



Witney Mills in 1880

Witney's late 20th-century history, from an architectural perspective, was dominated by rapid expansion of suburban housing, and by controversial planning disputes, particularly in the 1970s: Pevsner's denouncement of the 'abysmal' planning and dreariness of Welch Way (mid 1960s) typifies many of the problems. Pleasant, therefore, to have been able to finish the account on a more positive note – recording the planning award granted to the (admittedly rather bland) Woolgate Shopping Centre (1987), or the recent creation of more sensitive developments such as Wesley Walk, a narrow avenue of shops running back from High Street along the line of existing burgage plots and 'turries' or alley ways.

VCH Oxfordshire XIV is available from bookshops or direct from Boydell & Brewer. The recommended retail price (rrp) is £90, though the publishers are making a special 1/3rd reduction offer to OBR members of £67.50 + p & p if ordered before 28th February 2004 (order form enclosed with this mailing). For those with less deep pockets, the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies and other libraries are obtaining copies.

Simon Townley (VCH Oxfordshire)

Building Recording in Oxford City

To many members, the OBR seems concerned only with buildings outside Oxford. This is in fact not the case. The challenge in the city is that the rate of change is higher, and recording priorities relate to buildings which are subject to planning applications. There is thus more to do and less time in which to do it. Over the past few years such major changes have included the removal of Middle Schools, which brought about a whole series of demolitions, and currently there are many examples of pubs or largish or run-down houses being demolished in order to build blocks of flats. Although some of the threatened buildings are in conservation areas, and hence listed in the newspaper, others are not, and can only be discovered by checking weekly in the City Council office or via their website. Are these buildings worth recording? The pubs certainly may have features of interest, but so may the private houses – one may not be able to tell from the outside.

Many parts of Oxford still have local workshops of one kind or another. Those soon to be demolished include Salter's boat-building shop in Brook Street, the forge at the Jericho boatyard, Lucy's factory and Hutchins and Green's builders' yard on the canalside.

What should OBR do? We have set ourselves against getting involved in the planning process, yet that is the means by which these buildings are identified. The best time is after permission has been granted but before demolition starts. Rapid response is therefore essential. We would like to establish a network of 'eyes and ears' in Oxford who would be able to identify recording priorities and carry out such recording as can be done in the time available. What is the best way of doing this? We would like to hear your views.

A room has been booked in Rewley House for 2pm on Saturday 19 February 2005 for an initial meeting to explore what might be done. All members with an interest in the city, whether you live here or not are cordially invited. So that we can have an idea of numbers, please complete the form on the flier (enclosed) and send it to David Clark, 21 Walton Street, Oxford OX1 2JQ, by 16 February. Alternatively e-mail to david.clark3@which.net by the same date. Then you can hand the flier on to someone else you know who might be interested.

Dendrochronology

A reminder that funds are available to help towards financing tree-ring dating of timbers. If you know of a building that could be a suitable candidate, and where dendrochronological data could increase our knowledge, then contact the Secretary. Our Chairman will be happy to visit the building and advise on the next steps to move any application forward.

Forthcoming Events

Vernacular Buildings Worldwide : 10 weeks starting Monday 10th January 2005 7.30 – 9.30pm
Ewert House, Summertown. John Steane widens the scope of study of buildings to include cultural influences as well as locally available materials and climate. Contact OUDCE at ppweekly@conted.ox.ac.uk or tel. 01865 280892

Thursday 1st February : Discoveries in and around Castle Hill, Little Wittenham. Tim Allen will describe aspects of the landscape around Hill Farm, Little Wittenham, scene of a recent OBR study. OAHs lecture, 5.30 pm, Rewley House, Wellington Square, Oxford.

Saturday 19th February 2004 2pm Rewley House, Wellington Square. OBR open meeting to discuss policy for recording buildings in Oxford. See enclosed flier and p. 7 for details.

Saturday 16th April 2005 : The Making of the English Landscape. A one-day conference celebrating 50 years since the publication of Hoskin's book, and his influence on subsequent landscape studies. Speakers include several distinguished OBR members. To be held at Christ Church, Oxford, 10am – 4pm. Contact www.academic-study.com or Academic Study and Travel. 3 Whites Forge, Appleton, Oxon OX13 5LG

A weekend in Mid-April Our next building recording day, hopefully a farm complex at Caswell. These days are specially geared to encourage less experienced members to get a feel for recording; experienced recorders on hand, equipment available. Full details next issue.

Saturday 7th May 2005 : Oxfordshire Past. The annual review of archaeological recording work in Oxfordshire will this year be held in Eynsham, marking the millennium of the establishment of Eynsham Abbey. The programme and booking form will be available in March. For a copy send your details to Tony Dodd, 53 Radley Road, Abingdon OX14 3PN, tel. 01235 525960, e-mail tonv@oahs.org.uk

Saturday 21st May 2004 OBR AGM at The Chantry House, Henley, and guided tour round the historic buildings of Henley. Put the date in you diary, full details next issue.

Tuesday 16th August 2005 : Hampshire Excursion. In conjunction with OAHs. Visit to a working brickworks, King John's House and Romsey Abbey. See flier this issue. **BOOK EARLY**

Copy date and contacts

Copy date for Issue 22 is 1st March 2005. Please send articles, information, letters, reviews, etc. to me, Heather Horner, at Windrush Cottage, Station Road, South Leigh, Oxon. OX29 6XN, telephone 01993 773819, or e-mail hahwindrush@aol.com

The Secretary is David Clark, 21 Walton Street, Oxford OX1 2HQ, e-mail david.clark3@which.net

Do have a look at our expanding website at www.obr.org.uk. Comments and contributions welcome.

The OBR are extremely grateful to the *Oxfordshire Preservation Trust* for their generosity in supporting the production of *The Oxon Recorder* and to *Awards for All* in supporting our work to record the built heritage of Oxfordshire