

THE OXON RECORDER

Issue 38

Spring 2009



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

From Attic to Cellar: A new extended range of courses at Cogges. **Flyer enclosed**

AGM & Town Walk: Explore the buildings of Faringdon. **Flyer and minutes enclosed**

Recording Days: March 21 at East Hagbourne (oops, too late for this issue) and May 27 at Shipton-under-Wychwood. **Flyer enclosed**

OPT Open Doors: Volunteers needed to steward some special buildings.

Recent Recording: Laurences, Blewbury.

Time Team: What the excavators found at Radcot and news of a visit to Burford.

OBR goes East: Further adventures of the group of 2004.

Chalk as a Building Material: Get to know your local building materials.

OBR Camera: Good home required.

Appraisals Volunteers: Road-test a new City Council initiative.

Heather Horner, newsletter editor

Right: OBR members discussing the construction of "Laurences", Blewbury. See report next page.

Described as a 3-bay transition box-framed hall, mid 16th C.

Photo James W Hume



Volunteers for Open Doors 12/13 September 2009

Jane Baldwin of Oxford Preservation Trust, 10 Turn Again Lane, Oxford, writes:-

“We are organising *Oxford Open Doors* once again this year in support of the national Heritage Open Days over the weekend of 12/13 September. We wondered if the OBR might be interested in taking part in some way, or if any of its members might consider being a volunteer - stewarding for a couple of hours somewhere interesting?” Please contact Jane direct at J.Baldwin@oxfordpreservation.org.uk

Blewbury Recording Day, 28 February 2009

Ever since I moved to Olde Berkshire I have been fascinated by the buildings of Blewbury, and so I leapt at the chance to be involved in OBR's first recording day there. For those of you who aren't already familiar with this village, it is famous for its thatched cob walls and it has an unusually high number of timber-framed buildings. As a novice recorder, I wasn't sure how much I would be able to contribute, but Ken Hume, who led the day, was very encouraging and supportive. The house we were to record was "Laurences", a good example of a 3 bay box frame cottage which has been lovingly cared for and sensitively maintained in places by the current owners, Peter and Josie Cockrell.

An advance party had already visited the house to take some preliminary measurements, which along with some photographs had allowed Ken to construct a basic CAD model which he displayed to the group using Google SketchUp (free to download). This enabled us to see a 3-D representation of the house on a laptop and Ken confirmed that this had also been used to generate the recording sheets onto which we entered our measurements. The 3-D model was very helpful in enabling us to make sense of what we were seeing from the start, and the recording sheets speeded up the process of recording the building.

After a brief health and safety talk, we split into teams to look at different aspects of the house, e.g. the external walls, gables and internal structure. Ken had assured us that this was a relatively straightforward house to record, but there were still a number of questions to be answered. For example, we knew that there had been a house of the same name on this site in 1548 – but was this the same house? Had it originally been built as an open hall house? Were the staircase and chimney original? Our conclusions were that this house dates from the mid to late 16th century and that it probably was fitted with a chimney or some other form of smoke control device from new, and that the staircase had probably not moved; however some doubts remain as to whether the upper floors that can be seen today are original. I was a member of the indoor team and so my role was mainly to hold one end of the tape measure, but I quickly learned a lot more from my fellow team members and other participants. For example, I learnt how to tell the difference between oak and elm - we discovered lots of elm timbers, and this is apparently a feature of Blewbury village.

The morning was spent recording aspects of the house that had been allocated to us and then over lunch and afterwards we were able to share our findings and examine the rest of the house. We also worked through a new OBR checklist to help us to date the building. The group was divided into small working teams which enabled us to get to know each other and to explore and agree our method of working, which we are all keen to build upon for future recordings. I'm looking forward to my continued involvement in recording but I think that I probably should undertake the OBR building recording course first – as I feel as if I'm trying to run before I can walk!

Our activities generated a lot of interest among passers by, including a man, who was out walking his dog, and who invited us to come and record his house. Later in the day Audrey Long, who is the chair of the Local History Society, paid a visit to "Laurences" to observe the proceedings and she too volunteered her house for recording! In under a month the OBR SE Oxfordshire group has generated a list of 10 further properties to record in this charming village, including several with cruck frames, jetties and aisles. Hopefully, our intrepid group of recorders will be able to undertake this work.

Thanks to Ken and Fiona for all their good work done in setting up the day and for guiding us through it, and most importantly to Peter and Josie for welcoming us into their home and taking such a keen interest in our work. Now it's on with the report!

Claire Jeffery

Editor's note: OBR now has an active sub-group working in Blewbury, with a number of buildings identified for future recording. Ken has written some background notes for *Oxon Recorder*, to be included in Issue 39.

Time Team at Radcot Bridge

The television programme about Time Team's foray into Oxfordshire to investigate the impressive geophysics scan of a field beside Radcot Bridge was broadcast in mid-February. The expectation was that a previously unrecorded medieval castle guarding the important Thames crossing would be revealed. In the event, only the foundations of a massive tower were uncovered, and the conclusion was that the rest of the buildings visible on the scan - lodging, kitchens, chapel, etc. - had been completely robbed out; indeed, robber trenches were identified. The evidence pointed to a mid/late 12thC courtyard house attached to an earlier keep. The excavators identified pottery of 11th – 12th centuries, when the castle would have been in use, but then presumably razed to the ground to prevent further blockade of the bridge. The site had been abandoned, and any remaining surface evidence obliterated by the earthworks of a siege fort constructed during the English Civil War.

Intriguingly, a considerable amount of Roman pottery was also identified, in addition to possible Iron Age or Anglo-Saxon postholes. Examination of the landscape suggested that for thousands of years the site had been almost an island, surrounded by marshy ground, making it a defensible spot for guarding the crossing. Throughout the programme, OBR member Professor John Blair was on hand to advise on specific aspects of history of the area..



*Left: Radcot excavations, looking south-westwards across the excavated corner of the keep.
Photo John Blair*

And more ;-

As we went to press, we heard that Time Team will shortly be visiting Oxfordshire again. On 21/22/23 April they will be in the grounds of The Priory, Burford, looking for evidence of the original hospice. The resulting television programme is likely to be broadcast in early 2010.

Recording Day 21 March at Sundial Cottage, East Hagbourne

Sorry this issue did not reach you until after the event; we had to email notice to members. Sometimes opportunities for recording come up at short notice, so if people really want to be advised, then please submit your e-mail address to Membership Secretary David Hughes all@ldhughes.free-online.co.uk, or OBR Secretary David Clark david.clark3@which.net
Photo Heather Horner



The Weald & Downland Museum Revisited

One bitterly cold Saturday in November, 2004 I sat in a small unheated room in the Gridshell Building at the Weald & Downland Open Air Museum in West Sussex, with about twenty virtual strangers, listening to a talk by Joe Thompson, the head carpenter at the museum, about how timber was grown and prepared for the construction of timber-framed buildings. Joe's voice could barely be heard above the sound of chattering of teeth, and his face was scarcely discernable through the clouds of condensation caused by our outward breathing.

So what was I doing there this particular Saturday, and who were these people I found myself among? A few weeks earlier we had all met up for the first time, in a somewhat cheerless classroom, at Rewley House, Oxford, having signed up to embark on a course entitled "Vernacular Architecture", with the promise that if we regularly attended the two-hour sessions held each week for two years, wrote a total of 12 assignments of several thousand words each, read countless books with such inspiring titles as "The Illustrated Book of Vernacular Architecture", learned how to measure and draw a building, could identify such things as a "clasped purlin" or a "diminished haunch", demonstrated that we fully comprehended what Pantin's Typology was all about, sacrificed several week-ends to visit a number of obscure destinations in the South Midlands to risk life and limb peering into dusty attics, etc. etc. then we might, just might, receive a piece of paper with the words "Undergraduate Certificate in Vernacular Architecture" written upon it.

Somehow this seemed an offer that was simply too good to refuse.

However, I was faced with something of a logistical problem, in that I lived in Worthing, on the South Coast and Oxford was over a hundred miles away. But I reasoned that as I was at a time of life when I probably had more years behind me than in front of me, that if I didn't do it now, then I probably never would, and signed up for the course. Shortly afterwards I was invited up to Oxford to meet David Clark, the course tutor. David was charming and his enthusiasm for his topic was infectious, but not long into the meeting he asked me the inevitable question, "Why do you want to do the course, Richard?" I leaned across the table, looked him straight in the eye and said, "Because I'm totally barking mad." No, I didn't say that at all, but the thought did go through my mind.

And so it was, a few weeks after the course had started, the first of the Study week-ends that David had organised was to visit the Weald & Downland Museum, and the nearby medieval town of Steyning. This was the one and only time that living in Sussex was to prove an advantage to me. After Joe's talk we repaired to the refreshment bar, and bought hot soup. By the time we had carried it across to the nearby (unheated) building to consume it, a layer of ice was already beginning to form on the surface. "Cold, isn't it," said someone, stating the obvious. "Yes, and a bloody long way to come", grumbled someone else. I held my counsel, though I do remember tentatively saying that on a decent day it was actually quite a nice place. I was rewarded with a few disbelieving looks, and the conversation moved on to other things, such as, when were we leaving?

It is often at times of adversity that people start talking to each other, and that certainly seemed to be the case with the Sussex week-end. The miserable weather seemed to have a bonding effect, and the whole experience soon became part of the folklore of the group, so that whatever weather we encountered on subsequent expeditions, it was never deemed as bad as on that first outing.

So for the next two years I made the weekly trek up to Oxford. Mine, I discovered was but a short journey, compared with Jacky, who would drive up from her home in Devon, each week. Soon those strangers started to become friends. We'd laugh over shared experiences, discover and appreciate each others foibles and that, apart from Vernacular Architecture, we had a number of other things in common such as the enjoyment of good food and drink and generally having a good time, based on the premise that life is for living.

Thus when the course came to its conclusion and the University kept its part of the bargain by awarding each of us with our Certificate, it was tacitly agreed that we would still continue to meet up from time to time, upholding our love of Vernacular Architecture while at the same time enjoying ourselves as well.

Last year we explored the delights on offer in Marlborough, which included climbing up to the top of the church tower, and visiting the Merchant House, thanks to Richard Shaw. In April this year Jacky organised a wonderful week-end for us in Devon, where we learned the history of Colyton and visited a traditional tannery, as well as riding on the Colyton to Seaton tramway. By now, partners were joining in as well, wryly looking on as the rest of us enthused over the carpenters marks on a stopped and chamfered beam, or patiently explained to them what a baffle entry was.

It must have been following a splendid meal on the Saturday evening, where the wine had flowed, that I became dimly aware that not just one, but several people were saying, "How about a Sussex week-end, Richard?" "Yeah, sure." was my reply, safe in the knowledge that come the morning they would have forgotten all about it. Of course, I should have known better, but a decent wine does tend to make one agree to things one wouldn't agree to under normal circumstances.

Unfortunately, too many people had heard my assent to this suggestion, and a few of them, at least, still remembered the next morning. As I drove home the following day, it began to sink in what I had let myself in for. There was accommodation to sort out, meals, and a programme of events to keep them interested over a 48 hour period. And then, what if the weather was bad?

Amazingly, it all started to fit into place. I suggested a date in October, which was suitable for most of the group, and this was settled on. The Comfort Inn at Arundel, where everyone had stayed four years previously, was most helpful when it came to arranging accommodation and meals. Despite the unpromising previous visit, a number of the group said they would like to revisit the Weald & Downland Museum. It was all beginning to take shape.

Then one evening during the summer, I went on an organised walk round the village of Amberley, situated at the head of the Arun Valley, and deemed to be one of the prettiest villages in Sussex. On this walk, I happened to meet Joe Thompson, who by this time had bought and was restoring one of the old houses in the village. We got into conversation, and I asked him if he'd be prepared to meet up with the group and show them round the village. Much to my delight he agreed. Fortunately, he didn't seem to have any recollection of his previous encounter with us back in 2004. Then a short while after

that, I met Dr. Annabelle Hughes, who is probably the leading authority on timber-framed buildings in Sussex, and in recent years has been carrying out a study of the houses of Amberley. She also very kindly agreed to meet up with the group and tell them about her findings.

Right The "2004 Group" outside "Kennards" in Amberley. The decorative timbers at the front are a very rare feature in Sussex. Kennard was once the village thatcher. Photo Jacky Roberts-Wake.



About a mile from the village is the Amberley Working Museum, which is situated in a former chalk quarry. This is full of interesting exhibits, and also has an old bus and steam engine, to take people around the site. It is one of those places that has something of interest for everyone, and seemed an ideal place to take the group. Suddenly, I had one whole day of the week-end sorted.

With everyone agreed that they wanted to visit the Weald & Downland Museum, I thought that the group would also like to visit Midhurst, which is only a few miles up the road from the museum. Midhurst is a historic market town, crammed with old buildings. On its outskirts stand the impressive ruins of Cowdray House, and it is one of the most interesting towns in West Sussex, yet surprisingly little known outside the area.

Thus, with an eye on the weather forecast in the days leading up to the week-end, the group gathered at the Comfort Inn, on the Friday. The Saturday morning witnessed clear blue skies and bright sunshine. We met up with Joe Thompson and Annabelle Hughes in Amberley, who fascinated us with their knowledge of the buildings of the village. After lunch in the garden of the Black Horse (I had booked a room, thinking no one would want to sit in the garden in October!), we went down to the Museum, and from where Paul had to be dragged kicking and screaming from the industrial railway exhibition, when it came to closing time.

On the Sunday, again we were treated to more blue skies and warm sunshine. The buildings at the Weald & Downland looked stunning against a background of glorious autumn colours. One or two people refused to believe it was the same place they'd visited four years previously. After lunch, we made our way to Midhurst. Before rounding off proceedings with a cream tea at Ye Olde Tea Shoppe (notable for its late 17thC wall paintings), we gathered for a group photograph by the old mill pond. We stood for a moment in the warm late afternoon sunshine, the still waters of the pond reflecting the golden leaves of autumn. Total strangers four years ago, now a group of friends with so many shared experiences, and so many happy memories.

Richard Howell



*The group outside Cowdray House at Midhurst. Once one of the grandest houses in Sussex but destroyed by fire in 1793, the ruins featured in the opening credits of the BBC's 'Restoration' series. Photo Jacky Roberts-Wake.
Left to right:- Paul Clark, Richard Howell, Janet Clark, Sue Jacobs, Carrie Whitworth, Martin Whitworth, Lee Jones, Sue O'Dowd, Richard Shaw, Chris Howell, John O'Dowd.*

Chalk as a Building Material

Many of the cottages and farm buildings in villages such as at Ashbury, in the south west corner of the county, are built of chalk. Before brick became economically available in the 19th century, chalk was the only locally available building material. Chalk is reputedly an inferior building material as it is soft, porous and dissolves if not protected by a lime wash. Many of the cottages of Ashbury however are not protected by a lime wash and their walls are still in good order after 2-3 centuries of exposure to the weather. In researching the use of chalk as a building material the following extract from the “Villages of the White Horse” by Alfred Williams, published in 1913, gives a first hand account of the selection and preparation of chalk.

“Chalk requires time and great care in the preparation, and good stuff is not as easily obtained as heretofore – much chalk is soft and inconsistent; all it is fit for is for making tracks and paving yards, though a finer quality is obtained at Bishopstone and near the White Horse. There it is quarried out in masses as big as a horse, and is afterwards broken up, or sawn into squares and chiselled to requirement. Before it can be used for building, however, it must first be dried and tested, which is done by natural means. The chalk is quarried out in great masses and blocks in the summer and autumn, and left in the open; disposed in loose stacks and piles. Posts are then set in the earth, and a roof, generally of thatch, made over the whole, to keep off the wet. When the frost comes disintegration begins. All the soft chalk breaks up and falls away, leaving the hard solid stuff intact; whatever the frost has not broken is counted trustworthy, and carried off to the builders. There are hundreds of houses built of this along the down side, many of which have stood for centuries, and the edges and surface of the chalk are as good now, in many cases, as when they were first constructed”.

The two photographs of cottages in Ashbury, which lies between Bishopstone and the White Horse, mentioned by Williams, show unprotected chalk walls on 17th/18th century cottages. The earlier cottage was built wholly of chalk set on sarsen stones to prevent damp from rising. The later cottage shows brick used around openings and for decorative bandings. Note how sharp and smooth the chalk blocks have remained. These later cottages were built at a time when brick became more readily available but not at sufficiently low a cost to build the whole cottage of brick. As Alfred Williams noted almost a century ago, the chalk is as good now as when first constructed without the need for a protective lime wash.

David Hughes



*17th C cottage built of chalk on sarsen base
(and attic walls raised in brick).*



*18th C farm house with brick banding, openings
and quoins*

Editors note: this form of hard chalk is often referred to by the colloquial name “clunch”

Membership Reminders

Thanks to members for prompt response to renewal reminders, we have almost 90% subscriptions renewed. There is a pink form included with this issue if we have not yet received your cheque, and sadly some banks have not honoured standing orders, so a few members have requests to check with their bank.

OBR Camera

Oxfordshire Buildings Record owns a Fuji Finepix S7000 digital camera, 6.3Mp, 6x optical zoom. This camera is available to members, for use in recording/photographing buildings. Contact David Hughes on 01793 790821 or email all@ldhughes.free-online.co.uk

Appraisals volunteers

Oxford City Council is looking for volunteers to try out a conservation area appraisal 'toolkit' for non-specialists. All you have to do is to take a pro-forma down one street in Oxford and try to answer the questions on it about the character and distinctiveness of the street. For further information and to sign up please contact Gemma Smith at grsmith@oxford.gov.uk

Forthcoming Events

Saturday 28 March 2009: **St Thomas the Martyr: Piety and Poverty in an Oxford Parish** A day school (3 lectures and a guided walk) to be held at Rewley House, Wellington Square, Oxford. Information and booking ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk

Friday 8 – Sunday 10 May 2009: **Buildings & Farming: Past, Present and Future** A weekend school in association with the Historic Farm Buildings Group, to be held at Rewley House, Wellington Square, Oxford. Open to all, but book early. Information and booking ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk

Saturday 16 May 2009: OBR AGM at **Faringdon**. Guided town walk and buildings to visit. Flyer and last year's minutes enclosed

Wednesday 27 May 2009: **Recording Day**. The Shaven Crown, Shipton-under-Wychwood. Flyer enclosed

May/June/July 2009 **From Attic to Cellar; new extended series** mostly at Cogges Farm Museum.

Saturday 30 May **Window on the Past** - David Clark (dating features, fashions, fixtures)

Sunday 31 May **Raising the Roof** - Paul Clark (understanding form and function)

Saturday 20 June **Going to Church** - Paul Barnwell (changing use of liturgical spaces)

Sunday 28 June **Down on the Farm** – John Steane (farm buildings and their uses)

Sunday 26 July **Rule of Thumb** – Vic Allison (photography, measuring and drawing)

Friday 25 – Sunday 27 September 2009: **Markets and Market Places** A weekend school in association with the Vernacular Architecture Group, to be held at Rewley House, Wellington Square, Oxford. Open to all, but book early. Information and booking ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk

Saturday 22 November 2009 (provisional date) **OBR Presentation Day**. The chance for members to catch up on recent research, even if they cannot be active recorders themselves. Venue t.b.c., and there will be a guided walk or buildings to explore.

Copy date and contacts

Copy date for Issue 39 is 1st June 2009. 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, telephone 01865 516414, e-mail drc@davidrclark.plus.com or david.clark3@which.net

Our website is at www.OBR.org.uk

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