

# THE OXON RECORDER

Issue 40

Autumn 2009



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

**OBR Presentation Day.** Sunday 29 November 2009 Shipton under Wychwood. **Flyer enclosed** or p8.

**Blewbury buildings:** a new local group takes off.

**Ceiling joists in Henley:** earlier than anticipated.

**Marlborough report:** towers to toilets.

**Historic Farm Buildings Group:** The High Weald of Kent and Sussex.

**Members questionnaire:** We need to know what you want. **Enclosed**

*Heather Horner, newsletter editor*

*Right: Great Tree Barn, Blewbury, where spar-coating of the roof has recently been completed.*

*Photo: Chris Cambray*

Spar-coating involves only the removal of decayed areas before covering with a fresh layer of thatch. The basecoat and earlier layers of thatch remain intact, forming a

botanical record of the



surrounding farmland. Around Blewbury, crushed straw thatch ('long straw') was historically the most common form of thatched roof covering, but over the past 35 years has largely been replaced by 'combed wheat reed' (cleaned tubular straw) and water reed (*Phragmites australis*), more commonly known as Norfolk reed. The owner advises that in this case the thatcher has used *Triticale* combed wheat reed - a wheat/rye hybrid. The term 'reed' is an old English word meaning 'tubular stem'. Combed wheat reed laid 'reed-wise' with the butts of the stalks exposed gives a neat, soft, curvate and close-cropped finish to the thatch, whereas 'long straw' thatch has a more shaggy surface and flowing appearance. Top quality water reed applied by an experienced thatcher to a steeply pitched roof in a dry part of the country can last over 60 years, but imported water reed in our area will generally last no longer than good quality wheat straw. More importantly, water reed is a 'one coat' material and all of the ancient historic thatch on a roof needs to be stripped in order to fix water reed securely - which would detract from the character of the building and require planning permission. OBR members Alan Brodrick and Claire Jeffrey have both had to wait patiently all summer long whilst the barn was re-thatched and plan to record Great Tree Barn during October 2009. Prior to the recording day Anne Ree assisted by Ken Hume are undertaking a detailed risk assessment of the barn to ensure that it is as safe as practicable for the recorders to begin their work. This is part of the general OBR policy to endeavour to ensure a safe working environment for OBR volunteer recorders. An OBR risk assessment guideline form is available to members on request from the secretary (contact details p8).

With acknowledgement to John Letts

## Blewbury buildings

Blewbury is a picture postcard village on the north side of the Berkshire Downs, positioned along the spring line where purified water emerges from the chalk scarp to quench the thirst of villagers and feed the lush watercress beds. Before boundary reorganisation in 1972 this village was in Berkshire, and the buildings fully reflect the thatched timber-framed tradition of this region of the former county. The village contains a cornucopia of outstanding vernacular buildings, over 60 of them being listed including aisled barns, jettied houses, cruck halls, and box timber frames, as well as brick, flint, chalk and tile hung houses. A unique feature is the lengths of thatched cob walls which meander along the lanes in the village centre. It is encouraging to see a programme of new building employing oak timber frame and thatch, some replacing previous elements of vernacular building stock known to have been lost to fire and decay, and helping to create the historic buildings of tomorrow. This building programme along with various extensions and adaptations of existing historic buildings to meet today's demanding lifestyles can be seen at The Manor courtyard barns, Nottingham Fee Cottage and Turkeys.



*Left: "Stocks", a 3 1/2 bay cruck-framed open hall, early 15<sup>th</sup> C*

*Photo: James W Hume*

OBR has now formed a local team to survey and record some of Blewbury's old buildings. Ken Hume is heading up the recording effort, along with Anne Ree who is leading the local history and documentary evidence research in association with the existing *Blewbury Local History Group*. The BLHG has afforded OBR the use of a conference room in the village centre where report review meetings can be convened with both

OBR group members and building owners in attendance.

Initial OBR inspections have thus far revealed that elm is used extensively in the construction of timber frame buildings in Blewbury, and has been found as wall plates, braces, rafters, floor joists, spine beams, tie beams, mid rails, floor planks, stairs, *etc.* Oak is found but tends to be used sparingly; in particular it is used for sills and storey posts. The owner of nearby Hagbourne Mill (opposite Blewbury Mill) has advised that black poplar has been used in the construction of the mill and it is hoped to determine whether this currently rare timber has also been employed elsewhere in Blewbury. This tree can still be seen growing today in the village centre behind Millbrook Cottage and at the Manor where it has reached quite large proportions, certainly more than capable of being converted to produce timber frame scantlings. Black poplar, rather more common prior to extensive land drainage schemes, is known to have been used elsewhere to make cruck blades, and at least one cruck building discovered in Blewbury might well be a candidate to contain this unusual wood.

*Right: "Blue Haze" a 3 bay end-jettied open hall, mid 15<sup>th</sup> C*

*Photo: James W Hume*



The forward recording work load is significant and growing rapidly. Newcomers to OBR are welcome to join the recording effort where "on the job" training will be provided as necessary. This should suit those persons keen to learn more and actively participate in an OBR local group initiative recording programme. In the first instance OBR members from SE Oxfordshire and Berkshire will be given preference to participate in recordings but those from further afield will also be welcome when local members are not available. Please register your interest with Ken at [ken@kfhume.freemove.co.uk](mailto:ken@kfhume.freemove.co.uk) or Anne at [anne.ree@btopenworld.com](mailto:anne.ree@btopenworld.com).

*Ken Hume*

## 16<sup>th</sup> century vertically laid ceiling joists

*Notes on the floors and joists of **The Old White Hart, Henley, Harpsden Court, and Greys Court***

The sizes of ceiling joists and the way they are laid - horizontally, square, or vertically - tend to be used as a rough guide to the age of a building, such as flat laid earlier than square, vertical from end of 16<sup>th</sup> through 17<sup>th</sup> C and beyond. (Linda Hall, *Period House Fixtures and Fittings 1300-1900* (Newbury: Countryside Books, 2005) p164 on joist dimensions). As part of an intensive survey of historic buildings in Henley and four surrounding villages including Harpsden and Rotherfield Greys for the forthcoming *Victoria County History for Oxfordshire Volume 16*, some useful dendrochronological work by Dan Miles has established firm dates for integral floors with tall, vertically placed joists. All of these dates turned out to be earlier than anticipated on stylistic grounds.

**'The Old White Hart'** in Hart Street, Henley is a courtyard inn whose documentary records go back to 1428. Until 1530 it may have just been one inn of the many located along the wide high street, close to both river and bridge, but in that year a great expansion took place and a large courtyard was created behind it and two neighbouring burgage plots. This rear yard was surrounded on three sides by ranges with upper floor chambers, accessed by a probably continuous gallery. Although jettied and timber framed on the courtyard side, the main outer walls consist of narrow 'Tudor' bricks, laid in regular English bond. This brickwork was itself a major investment and a first in Henley when bricks were still a luxury, and offers evidence of a wealthy owner who was familiar with advancements in building technology and prepared to invest in it. Apart from the lavish use of bricks, the other innovative development was the introduction of vertically-laid joists for the jettied floors. These are the earliest securely dated vertically-laid joists in the town (dendro-dates 1530-31) where other dated examples were still square-laid in 1549 (Granary Cottage, Thameside).

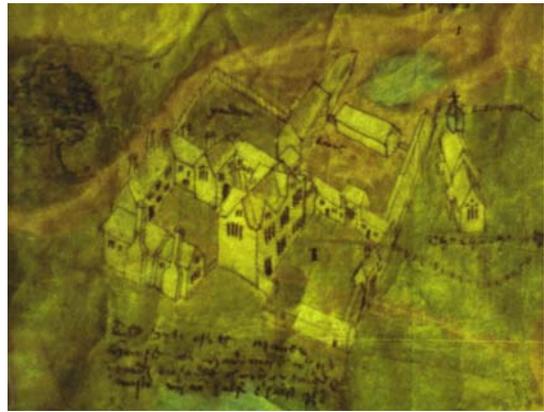


*Left: Looking upwards under the courtyard jetty of The Old White Hart, Henley*

The vertically-laid jetty joists are between 10-11 cm wide, 20 cm deep and laid at intervals of 27-37 cm. The transverse beam (emerging upper left in the photograph) measures 25 by 25cm for most of its length through the building, but then tapers to 20 cm at the front, ending up approximately level with the joists. All transverse beams in the building have this characteristic where they form part of the jetty around the yard. The possible reason for cutting back the underside of the large scantling beam may have been to avoid causing damage or injury to visiting horse drawn traffic or riders. The jetty is located between 2.60 - 2.70m above the current yard level, and there is evidence that the ground floor, or at least part of it, was used for stabling. Unlike the

ceiling joists of high status houses like Harpsden Court and Greys Court (described below) there was no need to achieve a level area for attaching a plaster ceiling below.

Whilst recording **Harpsden Court** with OBR members (see *The Oxon Recorder* 37) the similarity between the 16<sup>th</sup> century front range there, especially as shown on the Blagrave estate map of 1586 (below), and that of **Greys Court**, as it still looks today, became more and more apparent. In both cases, a medieval manor was given a new accommodation range, which included parts of earlier buildings. Both are of similar length and depth, multi gabled, with rear staircases and appear to have been built to a very similar pattern, perhaps even by the same master craftsmen, at least in part. Dan Miles' dendro work brought confirmation of very close felling dates, with 1568/9 for the roof timbers and trusses of Harpsden Court and of 1573/1576 for Greys Court.

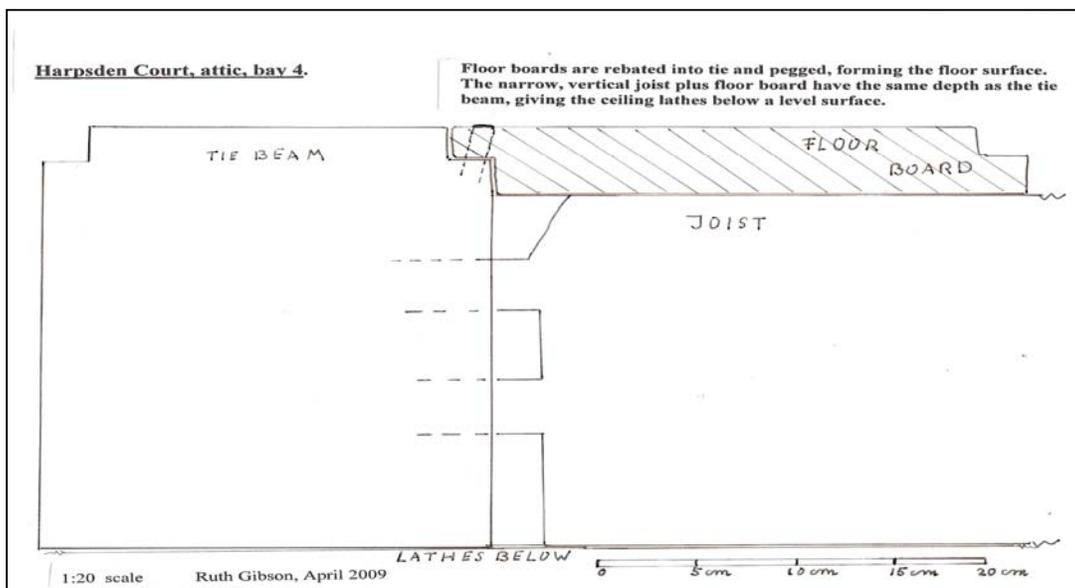


Left: south-east gable and front elevation of Greys Court

Right: Harpsden Court showing its new, multi gabled main lodging range, (tall central block) built c. 1568/9 for the lord of the manor of Harpsden, Humfrey Forster, and drawn in 1586 by John Blagrave of Reading as part of an estate survey. The similarity to Greys Court is striking.

There are also interesting similarities in the roof construction, such as the interrupted horizontal timbers in the attics. Those of Harpsden Court have stub collars and queen struts, which allow free passage through the roof space, whilst Greys Court has a complicated system of interrupted upper and lower tie beams, which is less satisfactory than the Harpsden Court scheme, but may have been necessary to take account of pre-existing structures.

However, it is the floor joists which indicate that there may have been communication between the builders of the two houses. Both have very similar tall, vertically-laid joists with double-tusk diminished-haunch tenons; however only those of Harpsden Court were measured and drawn up. The joists are *circa* 26cm deep by 7cm wide; adding the *circa* 5cm thick floor board they are of the same depth as the 30.5cm (1 foot) deep tie beam and form an even horizontal surface above as well as below, creating a uniform surface for fixing ceiling lathes to receive the ornate plaster work for the important rooms below. This then seems to be the main reason for the extravagant use of timber for the floor construction we see in both houses, though it also adds stability to the building at higher levels, and offers the possibility of insulation between the floorboards and the ceiling lathes. The illustrations below show that the construction details are similar in both houses. The drawing of a tie beam/joist and floor board assembly in Harpsden Court indicates the method of boarding in the polite areas of the attic space; the undersides of the floor board are gouged where ever required over the joists, to ensure a smooth and level surface.



*First floor, Greys Court. The vertically-set joists have diminished-haunch double-tusk tenons (timber to right) morticed into the tie beam (left timber). The ceiling lathes nailed below are clearly visible. The Greys Court tie beam is not rebated to receive the floor boards and the arrangement for the original boards was probably a simple drop-in. Photo: R Gibson*



It would seem that Henley, with its important trade links with London, was at the forefront of technological innovation, and that assumptions on dating from particular construction features must always be questioned.

*Ruth Gibson*

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### **OBR Excursion to Marlborough & The Merchants House**

An opportunity to explore the rich architectural heritage of Marlborough proved a popular invitation to OBR members as a large group of us gathered at St Peter's Church on Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> July 2009 for guided tours of the church tower, the High Street and the superbly impressive Merchant's House.

The day began with coffee for half of us, while the rest assembled for a visit to the tower, which we ascended via its winding stone staircase. Our climb included a pause to view the workings of the church clock; while on reaching the roof, we took in excellent views of the gently curving High Street and wide marketplace of this medieval planned town set in spectacular surrounding countryside.

While a second group made their way up the tower, Chris Rogers spoke to those remaining about the Victorian restoration of the east end of the church. He highlighted the spectacular hammerbeam roof and vivid colours of the tiles and stencilling which all dated from this period. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, as Victorian style fell out of fashion, the tiles and stencilling were concealed; however they have since been revealed for visitors to enjoy once more.

Following on from our tour of the church, we had the opportunity to enjoy a guided walk along the north side of the High Street, led by Chris Rogers. Our walk began at the church where we were given an overview of the development of the High Street and the vernacular style of architecture specific to Marlborough. He described the circumstances of the devastating fire of 1653 which had a significant impact on the town's development as it destroyed around two thirds of the houses in the town. Making our way further along the High Street, we spotted what were once thriving coaching inns on this early



London-Bath route, as well as Georgian 'makeovers' of post-fire buildings. We also discussed 20<sup>th</sup> century examples of what we thought were successful, or otherwise, attempts at building in the local tradition. All too soon it was time for lunch and for our tour to come to an end.

*Hill House, Kingston Street, dates from 1700, after the fire. It was built on a (possibly older) sarsen base, originally 7 bays, then re-fenestrated in 19<sup>th</sup> C for a private school headmaster's residence.*

Following a sandwich lunch at the Green Dragon, we made our way to the Merchant's House where we split into smaller groups for

tours of this spectacular building. It was built for Thomas Bayly, a silk merchant, between 1653 and 1670, and was extended in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Today, the house is leased by the Marlborough Town Council to the Merchant's House Trust which works to raise funds for the building's restoration. A walk through the house was a fascinating opportunity to see conservation work in progress and to see some fine examples of 17<sup>th</sup> century interior features. Highlights of our tour included the superb 17<sup>th</sup> century panelling in the room above the shop, as well as the recently revealed *tromp d'oeil* wall paintings in the staircase and rooms on the second floor. The Dining Room was also particularly impressive, with its vertical bands of vivid colours between wider ones of dark green. Here, the areas with original paint were conserved while the rest was repainted. Our tour concluded with a wander through the lovely gardens which were completed in 2007 and designed so as to be in keeping with the 17<sup>th</sup> century house. Thanks go to David Hughes, Chris Rogers, the St Peter's Church Trust, and the Merchant's House Trust for a most enjoyable day.

Kathryn Hay

*Some of the features at The Merchants House. Left: the unusual sundial in the window of the room over the shop, complete with Latin motto about time flying, and a fly as part of the design. Centre: the uncovered original striped paint in the dining room, with some modern reinstatement. Right: a well-ventilated privy. And below, the view from St Peter's church tower, showing the wide market place with a church at each end, and the burgage plots going down to the river on the right and a back lane on the left.*

*All photos: Heather Horner*



## Historic Farm Buildings Group Conference September 11-13 2009.

The Historic Farm Buildings Group is surprisingly small – 175 members (154 paid up) – and in some respects is a miniature version of the VAG (Vernacular Architecture Group). I have been a member for some years but had never before attended their conference. The format is a mixture of papers and visits, with an AGM thrown in for good measure. The study area this year was the High Weald of Kent and Sussex, and there were about 50 delegates, half of them locals attending only during the day.

Perhaps because of the professional interests of the handful of key players in the Group, there was a strong focus on landscape and conservation/planning issues, although it emerged that one reason for this was that much innovative work has been done in the Weald AONB (Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty) on historic landscape characterization and on managing the impacts of social and economic change on farming and farmsteads. Thus only David Martin's paper (similar to that presented in Oxford earlier this year – see *The Oxon Recorder* 39) was about the buildings themselves, while the other six dealt with the buildings in the landscape, the forces of change, the impacts of new planning policy guidance, and so on.

The High Weald is an area of wooded rolling hills in the centre of the Sussex-Kent area. The woodland is ancient, the settlement dispersed, and the fields small. Ancient routeways cross it from north to south, some of them deriving from drove roads used in Saxon times to take pigs up to the woods in the autumn. In the Middle Ages these swine pastures or 'dens' eventually grew into farmsteads, with fields assarted from the woodland, and cattle fed on oats superseded pigs as the main agricultural product. Barns and cattle shelters are thus the main surviving buildings. In the early modern period, hop growing became important and oast houses are common, although many have been converted. The field visits were to three places each with different issues relating to the conservation and/or conversion of farm buildings, mostly redundant.



*HFBG members having lunch at the working oast at Little Scotney Farm, Kent.*

At Little Scotney Farm on the National Trust Scotney Castle estate we were able to see working buildings, but even so the pressures are mounting – the cost of diesel for the kilns may make the Old Scotney Ale, sourced here, uneconomic. At Great Dixter, the medieval barn (1460-70s) with 19<sup>th</sup> century oasts attached, was a case study in the local building techniques such as weatherboards wedged into slots in the posts, and wattle-and-daub to the upper walls. Perhaps the highlight of the weekend was a visit to Hazelden, Sussex; a dispersed farmstead along an old driftway, on which were a range of buildings including a barn of ca.1600, and two rows of hoppers' huts – the tiny rooms provided for the annual influx of hop-pickers from London – with two elderly ladies, both of whom came here as children with their parents in the 1940s, to tell us about their experiences.

*David Clark*



*Barn at Hazelden Farm in Sussex - a scarf joint and evidence for an original diamond-mullion window, implying that the barn had a floored end for specialized storage.*

## Members Survey

You will find a survey questionnaire in this issue – it would really help if you could fill it in and send it back straight away. We intend also to send it as an attachment via e-mail if we have a valid address for you.

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## Forthcoming Events

Oxford Architectural & Historical Society: Autumn 2009 programme of lectures, Rewley House Lecture Theatre, Tuesdays at 5.30pm. Open to all.

13 October **The Gothic Recusant Chapel at Milton Manor** Anna Eavis (English Heritage)  
 27 October **The First Generation of Quakers in Oxford.** Dr Larry J Kreitzer  
 10 November **Brasses and Monuments** Fr Jerome Bertram  
 24 November **Monastic Landscapes of the Thames Valley** James Bond  
 8 December **Revising Pevsner's Berkshire** (OBR Lecture and Christmas party) Geoffrey Tyack

Mondays 7.30 – 9.30pm from 28 September 2009 for 10 weeks **Talking Houses: An Introduction to Vernacular Architecture** Tutor: Paul Clark [of OBR]. OUDCE Ewert House. Information and booking [ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk). Course full, but register your interest for a repeat.

Saturday 3 October 2009 **Medieval Wallingford** A one-day conference on the results of the nationally important *Burg to Borough* research project. Contact Judy Dewey, 16 Lapwing Lane, Cholsey, Wallingford, Oxon OX10 9QR or email the editor or secretary for a .pdf of the application form (below).

Wednesday 7 October 2009 **Recording Day in Steventon.** More details e-mail or phone the Secretary, David Clark (below). The North Star, and another house & barn.

Sunday 29 November 2009 **OBR Presentation Day.** Shipton under Wychwood The Shaven Crown from 10.30am & Shipton Village Hall, Station Road, from 1.30pm. The chance for members to catch up on recent research, even if they cannot be active recorders themselves. In the morning there will be a guided walk and buildings to explore, including The Shaven Crown (see Issue 39). After lunch, members' presentations. You can come to either/both halves. **Flyer enclosed**

Mondays 7.30 – 9.30pm from 18 January 2010 for 10 weeks **Seld and Solar: Buildings of the Medieval Town** Tutor: David Clark [of OBR]. OUDCE Ewert House. Information and booking [ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk)

Saturday 6 February 2010 **Oxford Views – Past, Present, Future** An OUDCE day school at Rewley House, in association with The Oxford Preservation Trust. Information and booking [ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk](mailto:ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk)

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## Copy date and contacts

Copy date for Issue 41 is 1<sup>st</sup> December 2009. Please send articles, information, letters, reviews, etc. to the editor, Heather Horner, at Windrush Cottage, Station Road, South Leigh, Oxon. OX29 6XN, telephone 01993 773819, or e-mail [hahwindrush@aol.com](mailto:hahwindrush@aol.com)

The Secretary is David Clark, 21 Walton Street, Oxford OX1 2HQ, telephone 01865 516414, e-mail [drc@davidrclark.plus.com](mailto:drc@davidrclark.plus.com) or [david.clark3@which.net](mailto:david.clark3@which.net)

Our website is at [www.OBR.org.uk](http://www.OBR.org.uk)

The OBR are extremely grateful to *The Oxford 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.

