

The OXON RECORDER

The Newsletter of Oxfordshire Buildings Record

Issue 59 Summer 2014



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

Curved Scissor-braces Hypothesis for a locally important feature

Gloucestershire VAG Conference Always something new (old?) to catch the imagination

Watlington Walkabout & AGM minutes Exploring a little known corner of Oxfordshire

Heather Horner, Newsletter Editor

Editorial

This will be my last edition as Editor of *The Oxon Recorder*, at least for some while. After 11 years and 43 issues, it is time for someone else to take over communication with our members.

I have not lost enthusiasm for vernacular buildings, and intend to continue as an active building recorder. But having recently passed my 70th birthday, I find I am taking stock of all the things I have yet to do with my life, and space has to come from somewhere. Mostly, I have enjoyed the challenge of assembling interesting sets of articles, and I trust our members have found them stimulating, educational and entertaining in equal measure.

I have rather dropped our committee in it, resigning without warning, so there is currently no successor in place. This could be your chance to take an active role in our organisation, working with enthusiastic and knowledgeable colleagues. I will of course act as go-between correspondent during the change-over period (contact details back page). A 'job description' is being prepared, and of course tasks could be shared.

So I'll sign off with a present-day version of the truly vernacular building, the allotment shed, which is where I intend to spend some of my newly-released time.

Heather Horner (former) Newsletter Editor



A truly vernacular building? Photo H, Horner

Hickman's Cottages, East Hendred and other curved scissor-braces

A number of roofs have been noted in the past few years in which a pair of curved scissor-braces spans the hall in a striking manner – clearly designed to make a statement. Two Oxfordshire examples are at Hickman's Cottages, East Hendred [*overleaf top*] and at 2 Market Place in Henley [*overleaf below*]. These two examples are sooted and so clearly medieval in date, but the

obvious questions of date range and geographical distribution suggest themselves – are they indeed a local vernacular form, and over what period are they found?

We have been able to make some progress on these as a result of funding provided in 2013 by the *Vernacular Architecture Group* to Nat Alcock for the dating of Hickman's Cottages in association with recording by OBR. This building has a two-bay cruck hall and was a candidate in the 1980s

Below : Hickman's Cottages, East Hendred.

Photo Chris Currie.



for tree-ring dating as part of the project that resulted in the book on the Medieval Peasant House published in 2013 by Nat and Dan Miles. However, it suffered a serious fire in 1985 and it was thought that insufficient timbers had survived to merit attention. In 2010, however, Dr



Above : 2 Market Place, Henley Photo Natalie Hill

Chris Currie revisited the house and found the remains of the central scissor brace – the lower branches having been removed for the insertion of a ceiling. Closer inspection found that – unlike the other (cruck) trusses, which were elm, this was oak, with potential for accurate dating. Indeed, Dan obtained the date of 1427, which fitted with the chronology and style of building for the period that they had discussed in their book. It was also at 21ft the widest cruck-framed building found in the Vale. Moreover, some carpentry details were found to be special. For example, the two cruck trusses had 'fair faces' towards the centre of the hall, yet the assembly marks were, unusually, on the opposite faces.

Funds were available within the grant for another building, and last autumn the opportunity arose to date the scissor-braced truss at 15 High Street, Abingdon (Olives restaurant, formerly Kitson's). The result was surprising – felling in winter 1500-1 – much later than expected, since the other related structure in Abingdon, the series of scissor-braces in the upper corridor of the Long Gallery at the Abbey, was

found to date from 1455. Moreover, the High Street truss was a secondary insertion into an earlier (1291) crown-post roof and had a groove all round to receive the laths of a barrel-vaulted ceiling, so the spectacular scissor-feature would never have been seen!



15 High Street, Abingdon. Photo David Clark

Clearly we seem to have similar carpentry supplying different needs, but with only two firmly dated examples (three if the Long Gallery at Abingdon is included) it is too early to draw firm conclusions. But we have been able to make some progress in identifying related examples for further research. There was a magnificent Buckinghamshire example in a building associated with the former medieval manor house at Wooburn D'Eyncourt, Bucks. This has been demolished, but was recorded in 1910 by the RCHME when investigating the buildings of Buckinghamshire. And Roger Evans (former Historic Buildings Officer for Bucks) re-discovered another at Manor Farm, Weston Turville, Bucks, where the mouldings suggest a late 15th century date. Like Wooburn, the cross-



Turville, Bucks.

over seems to be unpegged. The roof is more sophisticated than at Wooburn, with two sets of windbraces and chamfering on all timbers, and in addition a louvre support frame survives in the apex.

Left : Manor Farm, Weston

Photo Daniel Blackmore by kind permission of the Mss Cox

[a newly published history of Manor Farm is available £8.50, contact the editor for details (back page)]

Alcock and Miles postulated a curved scissor-brace at truss T3 in the Leopard, Bishop's Tackbrook, Warwickshire, based on the large number of unexplained pegholes in the principal rafters.

There are scissor-braced roofs from other parts of the country, too, but these have important differences from the ones we have been looking at. In Breconshire, for example, they are highly decorated and support king-posts, while an Essex example incorporates a collar. Other examples can be found in timber church towers – a non-

domestic context – for example at Lyford (Vale of White Horse) and Enborne (W Berks).

Our research hypothesis is thus that curved scissor-braces with the upper ends swinging up to meet the principals orthogonally is a feature of the central Midlands – Warwickshire to Hampshire – in the 15th century, and the tradition continued thereafter in an adapted form when new needs were identified. More examples, and firm dates, please.

David Clark

Watlington : Saturday 10 May 2014

OBR AGMs are always brief affairs; this year was no exception. The venue was Watlington Town Hall, which OBR recorded last year (*Issue 54, Spring 2013*), and our chairman's commendable brevity left the 30-or-so members free to explore the unusual 17th century building before lunch, followed by a walking tour of the town.

Most of us were unfamiliar with Watlington; it is no longer on the route to anywhere, and one needs to make an effort to get there. However the buildings of the town made it quite clear that this was not always the case. Evidence for earlier prosperity as a market trading centre were all around. The T-shaped brick Market Hall with schoolroom and master's lodging above were a gift to the town in 1664 from the Stonor family, staunch Catholics celebrating the religious freedom of Charles II's restoration. At some stage, a stair tower has been added, possibly replacing external stairs. Some of the timbers were Baltic pine, marked at some point in their journey with identifying symbols which are still evident.



Left ; Baltic timber marks, now in the gent's toilet's! There is an interesting clock mechanism without a face, announcing the

time by chiming. In the bellcote/attic storey is a single bell, possibly used for calling in the schoolboys, but it's mechanism was a puzzle, as it has a bellframe as well as both a hammer and a clapper. Bell ringer Paul Clark has written about this on the next page.

It is reputed that the school catered for up to 100 boys, including four scholars from Ewelme sponsored by Lady Alice Tipping. But a British

School was founded in 1846 which also accepted girls, and in 1874 children moved to the 'new' School Board buildings off Gorwell. After considerable neglect, the Town Hall building was fully restored in the early 20th century. Restoration was to a high 'Arts & Crafts' standard, and it was difficult to decide which features were original and which were modern.

Original or restoration? Moulded brick window frame & cast casements & fittings in the schoolroom.



During the 20th century, the Town Hall became the hub of town entertainment, especially the Saturday Night Dance, much favoured by the temporary residents of nearby Benson airfield. While we were there, the open-sided Market Hall at ground level was in active use for its original purpose, and the rooms above had a busy community timetable. This included our use for the consumption of an excellent lunch, after which we embarked upon a tour of the town, dodging between the spring showers.

A wealth of late medieval and early modern buildings survive along High Street continuing as Church Street, and Chapel Street area. Many of the buildings along Brook Street, Couching Street, and Shirburn Street around the Town Hall have Georgian fronts which could well mask older buildings, and there is evident 18th and 19th century replacement in a prosperous era of small artisan trades

The market had a charter from 1252, and a castle in the north part of the town beside the



Black Horse Cottage, Chapel Street, with cruck frame in gable end.



Jettied houses, probably 15thC, on High Street



'The Lilacs' on Brook Street, a 16thC hall with cross wings



Decorative brickwork in Church Street Below; Part-glazed brick featured in several house fronts.



church, so much trade due to Watlington's position at the centre of a fertile river plain with access to grazing and timber on the Chilterns. But the area around Watlington had been highly contested during the Civil War, with much looting, and subsequent dismantling of the castle. The 18th and 19th centuries saw some recovery as an agricultural trading centre with supporting artisan trades. The watercress beds had been productive, and schools for domestic servants and needlewomen were founded, whose buildings still survive, though modernised. The medieval church was largely rebuilt in 1870s. But planned railway lines never materialised, and agricultural depression hit Watlington hard.

However, such changes in fortune give building historians the opportunity to glimpse snapshots of the past.

Our thanks to OBR member Tim Horton for introducing us to the history and buildings of this little-known Oxfordshire town.

Heather Horner Photos H. Horner

The minutes of the AGM are reproduced overleaf.

The Town Hall Bell

An unfathomable feature of the bell was the wooden change-ringing wheel attached to its side, a device which is used to swing the bell, but which here was prevented from doing so by the bell mounting frame which passed through, and interfered with, the spokes of the wheel.

There are generally two ways of ringing a bell. One is to strike the hanging bell with a hammer, the other is to swing the bell, causing a clapper loosely mounted on the bell's inside, to strike the bell as it moves. Peculiar to England (and a few other Commonwealth countries) is a method where the bell is swung over 360°, from the balanced inverted position, through a complete circle, back to the balance position, and so forth, the clapper striking the bell as it swings. This method overcomes the limitation of the fixed-time "pendulum" effect of a hanging bell, permitting the timing of the bell to be delayed, and enabling a group of bells, so hung, to be rung in changing sequences. "Change ringing" as it is commonly known. The wooden wheel on the side of the bell is the device which permits this type of ringing – and is found only on bells arranged for change ringing. *(photo next page)*

So what was a change-ringing wheel doing mounted on this solitary bell? And why was it there when the bell frame prevented the wheel and bell from swinging? The change-ringing wheel is a detachable item, relatively easily removed from the bell, in sections, and reassembled when the bell is re-hung. It is not part of the structure which supports the bell. So if the bell came originally from a church bell tower, where it would have had a change-ringing wheel fitted, there would have been little reason to reattach the wheel when (if) it was re-located as a solitary bell. And no point at all when the bell frame passed through the wheel.

An interesting conundrum which perhaps suggests we are not in possession of the full story of how this bell, and its change-ringing wheel, come to be where they are today.

Paul Clark

Looking up into the bell cote. The frame passes through the bell wheel, preventing it from turning. The external hammer is adjacent to the supporting post.



OXFORDSHIRE BUILDINGS RECORD FOURTEENTH ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

Minutes of the fourteenth Annual General Meeting of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record held on Saturday 10 May 2014 in Watlington Town Hall, starting at 11.30 am.

The Chairman, Paul Clark, was in the chair. Twenty-eight members attended.

1. **Apologies for absence** had been received from Barbara Allison, Ann Atkinson, Barbara Creed, Keri Dearmer, Tim Peacock, Keith Randall, Sally Stradling, Simon Townley and Russell Weston.
2. **Minutes of the thirteenth AGM on 11 May 2013.** Adoption was proposed by Janet Casson and seconded by Chris Howlett. This was carried *nem con*.
3. **Matters arising:** there were no matters arising from the minutes.
4. **Treasurer's Report and Accounts for the year 2013.** Copies of the audited accounts were tabled. The Treasurer, Ann Atkinson had reported that receipts had exceeded expenditure by £208. The main income was from subscriptions (£1060) while expenditure was dominated by the newsletter, insurance and administration (£1543). The difference was more than covered by income from joining fees, donations and Gift Aid. At the year end the balance at bank was some £7350. A donation had been made to Oxford Preservation Trust in respect of their valued and generous help in printing the newsletter.

John Hine proposed, and John Steane seconded a motion that the accounts be adopted. This was carried *nem con*. The meeting expressed its warm gratitude to Ann for her assiduous management of the OBR finances over the past eight years.

5. **Secretary's Report.** The Secretary, David Clark, reported that recording work in 2013 was dominated by work in support of the South Oxfordshire Project, a multi-disciplinary study of Ewelme Hundred to gain an understanding of how the pre-1650 inhabitants lived their lives. The building work was professionally supervised by Sally Stradling with support from OBR. 44 buildings had been surveyed and the work was now being written up.

Group recording days were held at the stables in Cogges Manor Farm, Ivy House, Adderbury, Howberrywood Farm, Nuffield and Hickman's Cottages, East Hendred (dated to 1427/8) These continue to attract a good cross-section of members, and were the main way in which we tried to develop members' recording skills. Other buildings recorded during the year were Southfield farmhouse, Sutton Courtenay

where some new interpretations were made, and some Abingdon buildings as contributions to the history section of the town's new website. The crown-post roof at 15 High Street was dated to 1291 – the earliest tree-ring dated building in Abingdon.

The recording group in Chipping Norton won a significant grant from English Heritage to carry out an extensive survey of the town as part of their 'Early Fabric in Historic Towns' initiative. The annual presentation day was held in Chipping Norton, with the usual walkabout and talks by members on OBR activities during the year and acted as a launch for the project, attracting a number of local residents.

The OBR lecturer was Nat Alcock, who spoke on the medieval cruck-framed buildings of the county following publication of a major book on the topic in 2013.

He congratulated former Chairman, John Steane, and his colleague James Ayres, on the publication of their important survey of the buildings they had recorded over the past 20 years – *Traditional Buildings in the Oxford Region 1300-1840*.

Finally, he thanked all the committee for their work and support during the year, particularly to Claire Jeffery, who had taken over his committee administration tasks, and Donna Thynne who had made significant progress on the archiving and copyright issues.

6. **Membership Secretary's Report.** Paul Clark reported that membership stood at 222, a net increase of ten over the year. The continued upward trend in membership was encouraging. Five new members had joined via the website, and five from Chipping Norton. He reported the death of Barbara Painter in early 2014.

7. **Events Secretary's Report.** In Ann's absence, the chairman reported that there had been three well-supported excursions in 2013, to Bradford-on-Avon with Pam Slocombe, a walk through medieval Oxford with Julian Munby looking at inns and taverns, and the City of London with Hubert Pragnell. Ann was thanked for organising these.

8. **Newsletter Editor's Report.** Heather reported that there had been four issues during the year and extended thanks to all the contributors. She asked for help in setting up a desk-top publishing package to make production smoother, and thanked OPT for copying the newsletter each quarter, and husband Keith for practical assistance. 11 members now received electronic copies. Heather was thanked for her hard work on the newsletter.

9. **Election of Officers and Committee for 2013/14.**

Nominations had been received for posts of Chairman (Paul Clark), Secretary (David Clark) and Treasurer (Keri Dearmer). There being no further nominations, their election was proposed by Heather Horner, seconded by Vic Allison. This was carried *nem con*.

Offering themselves for election to the committee were Vic Allison, Barbara Creed (Webmaster), Heather Horner (Newsletter Editor), David Hughes, Tim Peacock, Donna Thynne (Archivist), Simon Townley and Martin Whitworth. There being no further nominations, their election was proposed by Sue Richards, seconded by Paul Jacques. This was carried *nem con*. It was noted that the committee intended to co-opt John Steane and Ann Atkinson.

10. **Election of Auditor.** David Clark proposed Brian Tonkin as auditor, seconded by Donna Thynne. This was carried *nem con*.

11. **Any other business.** Notice was given of a recording opportunity in Oxford. The meeting closed at 11.55am with a vote of thanks to the Chair.

D Clark, Secretary, 11 May 2014.

VAG Spring Conference Gloucestershire April 2014.

The Vernacular Architecture Group (VAG) Spring conference *Gloucestershire: Gloucester and The Vale* was a stimulating event. Having lived and studied in a limestone region for some 17 years it was refreshing to see buildings of



different materials (e.g. dark Pennant sandstone) and styles (very wide doors (left), very wide passageways).

The conference agenda visited buildings and settlements across the county, with a day spent in Gloucester. Two

buildings stood out for me; Oxwick Farm at Yate and a farm building at Brockworth Court, and in addition the plaster decoration in Meeks Shoe Shop in Gloucester.

Oxwick Farm was undergoing restoration, which actually meant that most of it was derelict. The owners, who were living in part of the house, had an amazing amount of vision and energy to take on the renovations, as the house is large and the plot also included a stable block and coach house (under wraps when we visited). The house dates from *circa* 1722 and was built by Robert Oxwick a fishmonger in London who died in 1741. The design is somewhat eccentric, being once described as 'most peculiar, a curious and unsophisticated blend of gabled vernacular and provincial baroque'. It is built of Pennant sandstone with brick and limestone finishes. The central building is more or less symmetrical with two stair turrets either side of the entrance hall, leading off to the domestic wings, and a bakehouse and kitchen as wings east and west.



Much of the house had been stripped out, with rafters and walls exposed. The round-headed doors and windows were an interesting feature and were repeated on cupboard doors and

archways.



Interior of Oxwick Farmhouse, matching cupboards & windows, but no floors or ceilings or plaster!

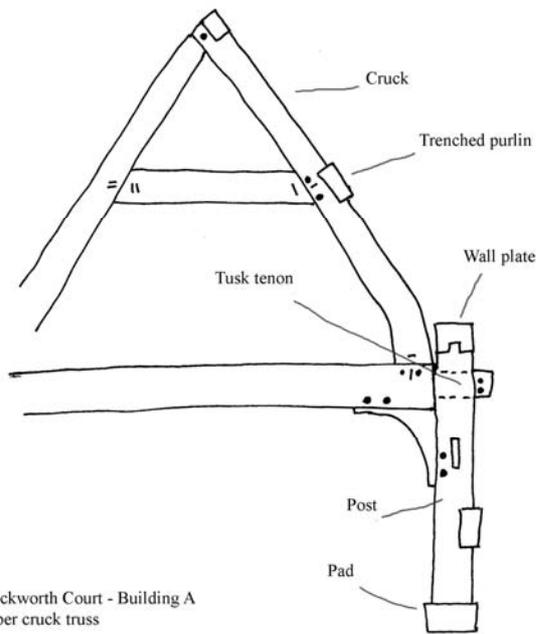
The attics were the most interesting with a kingpost and strut roof, where some trusses had painted construction marks. There was also a

cheese room ('CHEES ROOMS' painted on the door) with the remains of cheese racks.



The settlement at Brockworth Court was earlier and different. The Court was once owned by Llanthony Priory, and the house contains remains of a cruck barn (*circa* 1425) and (possibly) part of a 12th century range now the dining room. Many of the rooms have been dated to mid-15th century. The house sits in a farmstead with a church and farm buildings including a base-cruck barn (rebuilt 2008 after fire damage, some original timbers dated to 1307-15), stable, and cow sheds. Despite my interest in The Court house, I was distracted by a building in the farmstead called 'Building A'. The timber framing of this building was something I had not seen before.

It had an upper cruck truss with a dropped tie beam. The tie beam extended beyond the external weather boarding, going through a mortice in the post, and ended beyond the weatherboarding with two pegs securing the tie-beam in place and thus holding the whole truss together. Some discussion with other VAG members concluded that is termed a tusk tenon, also to be seen in Denmark, Devon and France. [*editor: confirming I saw these in Denmark*]



Brockworth Court - Building A
Upper cruck truss

Sketch of part of a truss at 'Building A', Brockworth Court

Visiting Meeks Shoe Shop, 14 Westgate Street, Gloucester was also a highlight. The 16th century timber-framed rear wing had several schemes of plaster decoration in what would have been the first floor 'best chamber', dating from early 17th century to early 18th century. The decoration was very interesting. The figures over the fireplace depicted indigenous people of Central America typical of early 17th century engravings, with stiff feather headdresses and skirts showing bounteous amounts of tropical fruit (perhaps breadfruit). As far as I am aware this subject



is not typical of plasterwork decoration (although Tudor plasterwork depicting an Indian Princess, sometimes thought to be Pocahontas, can be seen in a ceiling at Canons Ashby, Northants).

[Editor's insert: in the nearby Gloucester Museum, a chest dated 1604 depicted similar characters]



One wall also showed carnations and other flowers. This produced some discussion and it was thought could represent fuchsias. Fuchsias were discovered in Hispaniola (now Haiti/Dominican Republic) in circa 1693 when a French monk, Charles Plumier travelled there



with the botanist Joseph Donat Surian. Plumier's description of *Fuchsia* (*Fuchsia triphylla, flore coccineo*) was published in 1703. If the flower is a fuchsia it would date the ceiling (or this part of the ceiling) to the 18th century, later than previously thought. I have tried to find other 17th/18th century decorative plants in plasterwork, embroidery and carving, showing this feature but have drawn a blank. If anyone can identify this decoration, I would appreciate any information.

That such decoration should be topical in Gloucester is perhaps indicative of trade and merchant expectations at this time.

I would like to congratulate the Conference organisers for putting together such an excellent event. The variety of buildings, quality of facilities at Cheltenham College, and the conference guide were all impeccable.

Donna Thynne

Photos D. Thynne

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

OBR events

Chipping Norton Historic Fabric, in conjunction with English Heritage. Tenement surveys are ongoing, dates set in July, August & September, volunteers still needed, contact Vicky Hubbard, who is coordinating the project. (e-mail hubbards4@tesco.net) to register interest & receive more information.

Contact details for **photograph and document** information/volunteers (see Issue 57): Jan Cliffe, e-mail jan@thecliffefamily.co.uk, telephone 01608 641057 Adrienne Rosen, e-mail adrienne.rosen@kellogg.ox.ac.uk

Sunday 31 August 2014 **OBR excursion to Checkendon.** **Flyer has been emailed/posted to members**

Checkendon is a picturesque village set high on the Chilterns in South Oxfordshire surrounded by beechwoods. The village has a cluster of houses dating from the Medieval Period up to the Arts and Crafts era, centred on an 11th century church. Visits will include a 15th century cruck dwelling, a nearby farm with threshing barns and an un-restored medieval farmhouse, and an Arts and Crafts house. The village hall has been booked for lunch. £12 to include tours, all refreshments & lunch. Guests welcome.

Please book by contacting Ann Atkinson tel 01993 706210 adenatkinson@aol.com Final meeting details will be emailed or posted just before the date.

Saturday 22 November 2014 **OBR Presentations Day**, our yearly catch-up and members platform. Venue probably Great Hazeley, with buildings to visit, t.b.c. Put the date in your diary.

Other organisations

Wednesday 17th September 2014 **Wall Painting Symposium** at The Humanities Dept, Old Radcliffe Infirmary. Contact Kathryn.davies@english-heritage.org.uk for further information. New Oxfordshire discoveries to be discussed, hopefully.

OU DCE weekend and weekly courses. All open to the public. Oxford University Department of Continuing Education, Rewley House, Wellington Street, Oxford. Information and booking 01865 280892 or ppdayweek@conted.ox.ac.uk

Fri 26-Sun 28 September 2014 . **Workers Homes: Improvement and Technology** In conjunction with Vernacular Architecture Group.

Thursday evenings from January 2015 **Oxford Buildings in Context: Medieval Oxford.** Tutor David Clark .

Thursday mornings from April 2015 **How Old is that House?** Tutor Paul Clark.

[various other Architectural History courses on offer, see brochures or website]

OAHS (Oxfordshire Architectural & Historical Society) Lectures, Excursions, Oxfordshire Past

OAHS Lectures Rewley House, Wellington Street, Oxford on Tuesdays at 5.30 pm Free, open to all (with an invitation to join OAHS). New season starts October, watch for brochure.

4 November 2014 **OBR Lecture** Speaker & date t.b.c.

OAHS Excursions A full programme this season, see <http://www.oahs.org.uk> , early booking advised.

Saturday 19 July **Whittington Court, Andoversford, Nr Cheltenham.**

Saturday 9 August **A Walking Tour in North Oxford** with Peter Howell.

Saturday 13 September **Frogmore Paper Mill, Hemel Hempstead & Piccotts End Artisans' Cottages.**

Copy date and contacts

Copy date for Issue 60 is 1 September 2014. 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, e-mail hahwindrush@aol.com

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e-mail secretary@obr.org.uk, or drc@davidrclark.plus.com or david.clark3@which.net

The Events Secretary is Ann Atkinson tel 01993 706210 e-mail adenatkinson@aol.com

Our website is at www.OBR.org.uk, where all the illustrations are in full colour!

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.

