

The OXON RECORDER

The Newsletter of Oxfordshire Buildings Record

Issue 60 Autumn 2014



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

Recent Recording: Appleton Manor; 166-8 High Street Burford; Bury Knowle Barn, Oxford

OBR Checkendon Excursion: the church and some exciting barns and cottages – medieval to 1907

Wall Paintings Symposium: insights into our ancestors' interior decor

Nzulezu Stilt Settlement, Ghana: what our Secretary did on (last year's) holidays....

Editorial: goodbye to the hard-copy Newsletter, hello to the all-colour electronic one. (*Editor still needed!*)

Editorial from Chairman Paul Clark

Welcome to the latest OBR Newsletter, which in two significant ways marks the end of one era and the start of a new one.

First I should like on your behalf to express our grateful thanks to Heather Horner for editing our newsletter so professionally for the past eleven years. **We still need a replacement**, so if you think you may be interested please get in touch via membership@obr.org.uk. Meanwhile Heather has not given up writing for us, as you will see, and remains a member of the committee.

We are also indebted to the Oxford Preservation Trust for their generous support over the years in printing the newsletter on their super photocopier. As our membership has grown this has become a significant task, and we now feel we have imposed on their generosity long enough. Envelope stuffing has also become more onerous, and recent increases in postal charges have drastically increased our costs.

Accordingly, your committee have decided to bite the bullet and cease publishing a hard-copy newsletter – creating instead an electronic version to be sent out by email. We hope to do this on the same timetable as for the hard copy version, in January, April, July and October.

We realise that many members relish the hard copy newsletter, and will regret its passing – none of us like looking at computer screens for any length of time. The advantage, however, will be full colour illustrations and flexible length – due to space constraints some articles submitted for

the *Recorder* have never seen the light of day. In future it will be 'all the news that's fit to print'.

To receive the electronic newsletter, you will need to give us an email address. If you already get messages from us by email – recording days and the like – then you need take no action (unless you want to change your address). If you *don't* get any emails from us, then that is because either we do not have an address for you (or have lost it!), or you have changed your address without telling us. **So – if you would like to get future messages and newsletters from OBR, please send an e-mail now to membership@obr.org.uk using the address which you would like us to use.** Please be assured that we send all messages by blind copy so that your address is not disclosed (even to other members). In the meantime, please send any items for the newsletter to secretary@obr.org.uk.

OBR is also developing its presence on Twitter and Facebook. We are working to understand how best to use this and will keep you informed of progress. Welcome to the brave new world!

Curved scissor-braces: a Correction

A small correction from *Ruth Gibson* to our piece on curved scissor braces in Issue 59 (page 1): the Henley example is actually at **No. 25** Market Place (not No. 2), and is not smoke-blackened. Presumably it belonged to a small first-floor chamber, whose front bays have been rebuilt.

Recent Recording

Notes by the Secretary

Appleton Manor

This is one of those houses that has been studied by antiquaries and architectural historians over a long period because of its place in the canon of late Norman architecture. Its entrance portal 'worthy of any major church' opens to an entrance hall with two stone service doorways – all of the period c.1190. We were invited by the local project team to help record the building and focussed on the two-storey porch, the fireplaces, the joists in two of the reception rooms, and the central wall with the service doorways (and some quoins suggesting a staircase entry). The team have also discovered new documentary material and

gradually the story is coming together – with some reappraisal of the accepted history.



Appleton Manor

photo David Clark

166-8 High Street, Burford

By a stroke of luck, the new owners of 166 High Street were also able to acquire its neighbour to the north, and confirmed that they once formed a single building. This consisted of front and rear stone walls inserted between pre-existing buildings to the north and south, with a roof of five A-frame trusses, which Dan Miles confirmed as all dating to 1548. But it did not seem to have been built for domestic use although it was provided with fireplaces and floors not long after completion. It may have belonged to rich merchant Edmund Silvester and as he died in 1558, his heirs may have created the cottage we

shall soon see re-emerging as the new owners complete their renovation work.



166-8 High Street, Burford: fireplace in the inserted transverse wall. Photo David Clark

Bury Knowle Barn, Oxford

This was another property in the course of renovation – in fact conversion of a barn to domestic use after many years as a workshop and store used by the City Council.

We noted that it may have origins in a barn mentioned in 1697, but the somewhat skewed plan was probably the result of having to build within existing plot boundaries and/or walls. As the cranked inner-principal roof structure is found over a wide date range from the late 17th to the late 19th C, it is also possible that some of the timbers had been re-used from that building. The roof trusses dated from a rebuilding phase in which the two northern tie-beams were truncated,

reset on timber baulks, and a new upper structure created, using three of the four previous mortices.
[continued opposite]



The Roof Structure. Photo D. Clark

[Bury Knowle Barn] The next rebuilding phase involved replacement of the purlins with timbers of smaller scantling, insertion of ridge pieces supported by yokes, hip rafters and such common rafters as had not survived the removal of the previous purlins. This work was done from north

to south probably in the mid 19th century (when the building was still being used for agricultural purposes), using timbers from the family business, the Knowles building firm.

David Clark

OBR Checkendon excursion 31 August 2014

Checkendon is a dispersed settlement with early enclosures, its name probably referring to a *denu* (or U-shaped valley). It was mentioned in the Domesday Book. See Steane and Ayres (2013) pp.249-259 for more on the village and the rectory house.



The church with its 12th-c. apse Photo David Clark

Buildings visited on the excursion included the church (dedicated to St Peter and St Paul), with a 12th-century nave, chancel and apse. Some brave souls even climbed a precarious ladder in the 15th-century west tower to examine the bells! Other fascinating features included a set of 13th-century wall paintings in the apse; 15th-century brasses; a 16th-century font; and numerous funerary monuments in the chancel.

More recent work included a sculpture of 1960 by Eric Kennington, and a memorial window to him by Laurence Whistler.

Langtree Cottages were built in 1906/7 on the rickyard of a former farm. The architect was Maxwell Ayrton who worked in Lutyens' office. They are timber-framed with lath and plaster infill on a brick plinth; divided into three cottages, the one we visited has board doors with good ironware, and an original built-in dresser in the front room.

Foundry Cottage, we concluded, was a three-bay cruck-framed hall-house, with a box-framed

extension added probably when floor and chimneystack were inserted.



The Exlade Street barn, incorporating part of a domestic cruck frame. Photo David Clark

In Exlade Street was a five-bay black weatherboarded barn which has recently gained planning permission for residential use. The owner had shown that the first three bays contained pretty much the entire frame of a cruck-framed house recycled as part of the barn frame. The end three bays and porch are later additions.



Scots Farm barn, with cranked inner principals. Photo David Clark

Scots Farm was a revelation – two barns, some outbuildings and a close-studded bay of a former medieval house, mostly hidden under a whitewashed wall but with some ochre paint on the inside wall.

David Clark



Checkendon continued. Left: OBR member Ken Hume demonstrates some of the skills associated with timber-framed building construction, in his woodland near Checkendon. Right: our former Chairman hard at work inspecting a roof.

Wall Paintings

Symposium held at The Humanities Department, University of Oxford, 17 September 2014



Fragmentary 16th-century wall paintings in the roof space of 113 High Street, Burford. Photo D. Clark

How often do you redecorate your home? Ten years? Twenty years? At a change of ownership? Creating a décor that reflects your outlook on life and the message you want to give to your visitors has been a universal human trait for millennia. True, the Neolithic residents of Scara Brae could not nip down to Ikea for a flat-pack and this season's colour wash, but nevertheless they were at pains to furnish their necessarily dark and smoky houses for comfort and to impress. Moving on a few thousand years, the introduction of chimneys to control smoke pollution and window glass to allow larger amounts of daylight into the home opened a whole new spectrum of opportunities for internal décor.

From mid 16th C to mid 17th C, the fashion for the middling sort (and those who aspired to join them) was to have the walls of their public and private spaces painted all over with designs in bright reds, yellows, white and black (with just a little blue and green, harder colours to produce). A conventional layout developed, with a frieze near ceiling level, the main body of the walls in an all-over design (continuing over everything, timbers, panels, doors, etc), and usually a plainer dado below (where the walls could be damp, or the furniture obscured). The frieze contained religious texts, almost always in English, but not exact quotations; rather they had gone through the folk process of distilling out the essential meaning in plain language. People evidently chose sayings that they wished to live by, a personal code in the private space of the chamber, and a sometimes politically nuanced set in the more public spaces of the hall and parlour.

Below the frieze, the main scheme could be fictive – pretend fabric, realistically painted to include fixings for hanging on the wall – or large interlocking patterns (some copied from book frontispieces, then later from pattern books) - or large scenes portraying parables (just one per scene, the story distilled into a single image) – or variations on coats of arms and portraits, giving messages of allegiances.

Survival of paint schemes is a matter of accident, maybe by being over-painted or panelled over, then rediscovered many years later. Frequently, a year date is included somewhere in the scheme, which can help to distinguish phases of style and fashion, but a consideration of all the factors that went into

creating the relatively short-lived culture of wall painting has never seriously been attempted.

The symposium brought together a disparate group of researchers from several fields of expertise, for discussion and cooperation. Conservators looked at the fine detail of design, discovering different layers of messages, the deciphering of which would have been part of the viewers expected experience – these were riddles and puzzles to be teased at and discussed. Social historians outlined the possible status of the commissioning householder and of the intended audience, and whether social mobility was a factor. A consideration of the constantly changing religious and political climate placed the wall paintings into a national context, while domestic interiors with competitive schemes of decoration of ceilings, furniture, framed pictures and textiles put the wall paintings into their immediate surroundings.

An open forum discussed some examples of surviving wall painting schemes, with interpretation emerging at all levels from simply proving an owner acknowledged the aesthetics of luxurious (and draft-excluding) drapery, through to announcing (or sometimes disguising) both

political and religious affiliations. Many questions remained unanswered, such as how much painting once existed on the exterior walls of buildings, or who did the painting, or how the designs were transmitted or applied. The loss of the surviving corpus of paint schemes was deplored – many are unrecorded and disappearing at an alarming rate, or survive only as fragments or transferred to museums, thus losing context. Conveying the original message relied on the relative juxtaposition and status of the viewer experiencing the building, the other people present, and the social or formal occasion.

Kathy Davies did a great service to local and social history by initiating this symposium, facilitated by newly formed *The Oxford Research Centre in the Humanities and English Heritage* (TORCH). A real interdisciplinary interest was generated, and it was resolved to attempt a register of known wall paintings. We finished with a visit to a couple of surviving paint schemes in Cornmarket, courtesy of Julian Munby. I found it an altogether stimulating and rewarding day.

Heather Horner



A fragmentary paint scheme recently discovered at Roke, near Benson. The location is the roof slope of the upper chamber of a two-up two-down cottage dating from c.1550. The design includes a beatitude 'Blesed are thay that feare the Lord and....', and an unidentified coat of arms which has been heavily scored out, leaving unanswered questions. Photo: H. Horner



A detail of the scheme at Roke Photo: H. Horner

Nzulezu Stilt Settlement (Ghana, Western Region)

This remarkable village is located near Ghana's frontier with Côte d'Ivoire, and although just a couple of miles from the ocean, the lagoon water is fresh, fed by the Amansuri river. To reach the village one has first to trek over the dried-up bed of a former swamp, part of the Amansuri wetland, the largest area of swamp forest in Ghana.



Nzulezu from the lake. Photo D. Clark

On our visit (in April), most of the walk was bone-dry (it being the dry season the water levels were some five feet below those in the rainy season). The path ran out at a shallow creek where canoes were provided for the rest of the journey. The first section was on the Amansuri river, through the swamp forest close by on either side – some exotic plants but not much fauna, it being too hot in the middle of the day. Soon we were on the freshwater Lake Amansuri where the village was soon visible huddled near the shore about a mile away. The village consists of one long street with houses along the side, together with a few built out a short distance into the lake, and others built between the street and the land behind.



High Street, Nzulezu. Photo D. Clark

It is difficult in a country where the historical tradition is oral to be sure when and why things are the way they are. The inhabitants of the village are said to have migrated from Walata, a city in the ancient Ghana Empire, the earliest of the Western Sudanese States. According to tradition, ancestors of the village were brought to their present place having been guided by a snail. The date of its foundation is said to be c.1500 and today it supports some 500 people. Although they do catch fish in the lake – using nets and wicker traps resembling English eel traps and fixed to trees on the banks or tied to poles set into the lake-bed – they are primarily farmers, but their fields are on the opposite side of the lake from the village.



Dwelling in Nzulezu. Photo D. Clark

Why would farmers build a village on stilts in a lake, especially as they were supposed to have come from a Saharan homeland? The official reasons include safety from attack and for fire protection. But why would the locals allow them to cultivate land yet be reluctant to give them land for a village, and why are the fields so far away from the village? As with almost everywhere in Ghana today, there was no guidebook – all information was provided by the local guide. Although the advantage of this is to be able to ask questions, the Ghanaian tendency to answer always with a 'yes' made it difficult to obtain any useful information. Thus, asked if there was now a road as well as the canoe route to the village, the yes answer may have been correct, as there was no lake traffic other than that for tourists. But on the other hand there was no obvious evidence for another entry point, although the settlement is in fact quite close to the lakeshore and the main road could not have been too far away.

The details for the World Heritage Site application do not help much, stating that '*the serene ambience of the surrounding landscape, coupled*

with the general activities of life, point to a dynamic relationship between man and nature. All activities pertaining to normal life chores such as pounding of fufu (a traditional meal), schooling, worship and burial are done on the lake. Newborn babies are baptised in the lake. Nzulezu stilt settlement is a unique lacustrine habitation achieved by a harmony of forces of nature to meet man's needs, resulting in a settlement of outstanding value.'

There was some building activity going on, and it was fairly clear how the houses were built. Forked posts are set into the lake-bed, and horizontal poles placed across the forks to make a platform. Then further poles are placed across these at right angles.

Some of these platforms have only one layer of poles, others have two. When the platform is finished, the house – a simple unbraced framework – is erected and the walls of vertical bamboo poles are attached to the inner surface. The superstructure seems to be held in place only by gravity.

The traditional roof covering is some form of thatch (raffia or palm leaves), but corrugated iron has become popular as a quick and easy substitute.

It was not clear what sort of repair and maintenance regime was needed. On the one

hand, we were told that posts were replaced regularly as they rotted, suggesting a continuous maintenance programme. However, we were also told that the 'oldest house' in the settlement was only 25 years old – suggesting a far more radical programme of village rebuilding.

There is another stilt village – Ganvié – along the coast to the east in Benin (formerly Dahomey). This is not on the UNESCO list, but appears to be quite different in concept from Nzulezu, comprising a large number of separate houses in the lake (with no main street), and with all interaction being by canoe. The method of construction is also quite different – the poles are 3-4m long and extend to eaves level, the floors being tied to them by palm fibres. Another local tradition in Nigeria uses lead-bearing linear timbers, so it is a mystery why the Nzulezu settlement is the way it is. I have not explored this subject further, but if anyone has encountered such villages in other parts of the world – there are a number in the Far East, for example in Burma and Cambodia – or has researched the topic using Paul Oliver's collection at Brookes University, then please feel free to contact me for photographs or further details about Nzulezu.

David Clark (2013)



House platform under construction



House platform completed



House built on platform



Double-platform house



Wall structures erected

All photos D. Clark

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

OBR events

28 October (Tuesday 5.30pm): The OBR lecture at OAHS, Rewley House, Wellington Square, Oxford. Prof. Malcolm Airs will speak on the failed Pier Luigi Nervi building for the Pitt-Rivers Museum – a story that changed the approach to building conservation in Oxford, but about which Malcolm has uncovered much new material.

22 November (Saturday) Great Haseley: Annual OBR Presentation Day. We shall begin with a morning walk around the village, with the windmill and a medieval barn as highlights. After lunch there will be a series of short talks by members on the buildings they have recorded over the past 12 months. The focus will be on Ewelme Hundred and the South Oxfordshire Project, but we shall also have updates from work in Abingdon, Chipping Norton and elsewhere in the county. More details and booking form in flyer enclosed. Please send offers of talks to secretary@obr.org.uk.

Other organisations

9 December. (Tuesday 5.30pm) Another buildings-related lecture offered by OAHS at Rewley House. Geoffrey Tyack will speak on the topic, 'Who designed The Queen's College?' Followed by a Christmas party – for members of OAHS.

OUDECE 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

22 January–26 March 2015: Oxford Buildings in Context – part one: medieval Oxford. Ten-week course with our secretary, David Clark, exploring the development of Oxford's built environment from the Saxon period to the Middle Ages. Castles, churches, colleges, town-houses shops, inns and taverns will all feature, and will be considered in relation to similar buildings elsewhere in Britain and (occasionally) elsewhere. Book at <https://www.conted.ox.ac.uk/courses/details.php?id=K900-91&AllCourses=yes>

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.

OLHA (Oxfordshire Local History Association): See <http://www.olha.org.uk> for upcoming Study Days, and for a list of other events and talks in Oxfordshire.

Copy date and contacts

Copy date for Issue 61 is 1 December 2014. **We still need an Editor** (this issue has been put together by committee members), so for now please send articles, information, letters, reviews, etc. to the Secretary David Clark (address below). Better still, if you may be interested in taking on the job email membership@obr.org.uk.

The Secretary is David Clark, 21 Walton Street, Oxford OX1 2HQ, telephone 01865 516414, e-mail secretary@obr.org.uk, or drc@davidrclark.plus.com or david.clark3@which.net

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.

