

# THE OXON RECORDER

Issue 1

September 1999

Welcome to this inaugural issue of *The Oxon Recorder*, keeping you up to date with progress on setting up the Oxfordshire Buildings Record.

First of all a big thank you to all who responded so promptly to the questionnaire. There was a very positive result, with many people offering records to be archived, wanting to do building recording, attend courses, and making helpful suggestions as to the way forward. This update is also going to those who have not yet responded, in the hope it might encourage them to reply.

We have now established a small team of helpers, taking charge of each of three areas in which we need to make progress. These are:

1. contacting owners of records and helping them prepare these for deposit in the OBR. Expect a call from Pat Harding if you have such records.

2. setting up teams of building recorders in different parts of the County, helping them update their skills and deciding recording priorities. Potential recorders should await further details from John Steane.

3. setting up the computerised database of buildings, and inputting cross-references to existing sources of information. David Clark will be taking this forward.

In addition, we are very pleased that Malcolm Airs has agreed to advise us. The more people we can involve as supporters, the easier each of these tasks will be, so if you feel you have time or effort to devote, please contact us:



telephone numbers appear at the end of the newsletter.

## ODUCE Courses and Schools 1999/2000

The Department for Continuing Education at Oxford University offers a number of courses each year related to the built heritage. Of most relevance to the OBR is John Steane's 10-week course on Monday evenings starting in January 2000. Its title is *The Oxfordshire Buildings Record*, and is aimed at anyone interested in helping, as a desk researcher or tape measure recorder.

Also, for those interested in the more general picture of surveying the historic buildings of England, a Weekend School, *A Century of Public Survey in England* will bring together people concerned with the Buildings of England, Victoria County History, Royal Commission on Historic Monuments, and others to review this vast and difficult subject. Rewley House 26-28 November 1999.

Of more general interest are *Architecture - What is it?*, starting in October, *The Changing Home*, to be held in East Hendred, starting in September, and *Buildings and Local History*, to be held in Bicester in May.

For details of these and other OUDCE courses, apply to them at Rewley House, 1 Wellington Square, Oxford OX1 2JA (01865 270391)

**OXFORDSHIRE ARCHITECTURAL AND HISTORICAL SOCIETY**

Listed Buildings Sub-committee

We hope to produce a regular newsletter to keep you informed of developments, and also to bring to your notice some of the recording work which has been done. Remember that in general we know very little about the vernacular buildings of Oxfordshire, and every new contribution is important, as the following report by one of John Steane's recent students, shows. We hope to report further on this building in a later issue.

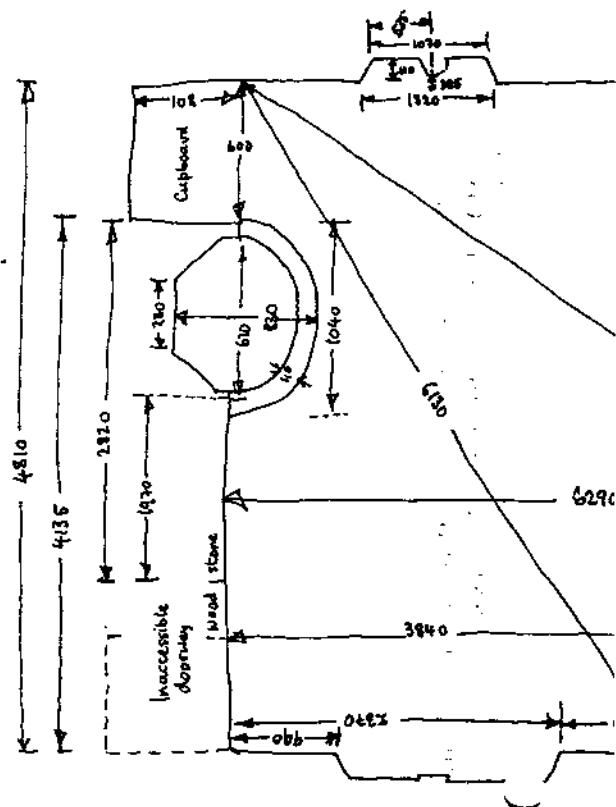
#### PRIORY FARM, COLD NORTON

by Cathy Westbrook

On a very cold Sunday in March 1998 about a dozen of us congregated at Priory Farm, Cold Norton, to carry out a survey of the building. We were attending a course in vernacular architecture organized by the University of Oxford Department for Continuing Education. Our tutor, John Steane, had spent several winter evenings drumming recording techniques into us, but we were to discover that theory and practice are two very different beasts! The farm had recently been bought by a couple from London with a young family. It was being completely gutted and renovated, including a new roof, which was exposed the day of our visit. This state of disrepair provided an ideal opportunity for one tutor and 12 wet students with muddy feet to trample over the house without causing too much havoc! The main farmhouse is quite extensive with 4 large rooms downstairs, 5 rooms on the first floor plus two attic rooms and a cellar. The building was clearly of some age as it had several stone mullioned windows with lead comes and fireplaces with stone lintels. But how old is old? It was our job to find out.

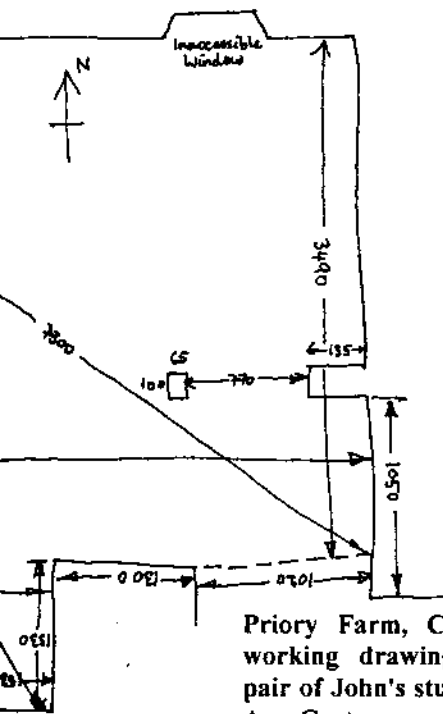
We split into two groups, one group for the ground floor and one for the first floor. I found myself in good company as my colleagues included a chartered surveyor, an artist and a doctor. The surveyor provided the necessary technical skills, the artist was invaluable for drawing and the doctor - well he drank lots of cups of coffee! John left us to our own devices and set off into the loft with his paper, pencils and tape measure to draw the roof timbers.

We began by having a general look around to get our bearings and then drew a very rough plan of the first floor including the position of the windows, doors and fireplaces. This gave us an overall picture and allowed us to plan how we were to proceed. We then split into



three pairs, each measuring a room at a time. I have learned from bitter experience that measuring a room requires two people, a very long tape measure, a calculator and a ready supply of Valium! Measurements are made along each side of the room and then both diagonals. These measurements must be accurate if scale plans are to be drawn. It is amazing how two seemingly intelligent people can come up with two completely different measurements for the same distance and how the diagonal measurements often bear no relation whatsoever to the dimensions of the walls. From these measurements we were supposed to draw accurate scale plans of our room. My partner and I (yes you guessed it, my partner was the doctor) ended up with a room with no right angles! Eventually however after many arguments and re-measurements we managed to correct our mistakes and our basic room plan was complete. The other pairs added their room plans and we finally ended up with a scaled drawing of the main rooms on the first floor.

The next task was to measure the windows, doors and fireplaces and draw these on to our plan. The windows were extremely complicated to measure and draw to scale as each had carved stone mullions. We had a reasonably good stab at it though and were rather pleased with our final drawings. However the hardest task was yet to come - measuring the thickness of both internal and external walls. The former is harder than it sounds as it involves placing a rigid metal tape measure around a fairly large doorjamb, and



Priory Farm, Cold Norton. One of the working drawings produced by another pair of John's students, David Dunford and Ann Carter.

then subtracting the distance from the jamb to the wall on both sides. This seemingly simple task defeated even the best of us and we all came up with completely different values. The doctor, fancying himself as a bit of a scientist, decided to take a strictly mathematical approach by formulating an equation, inserting various measurements, and then solving it. He was slightly disappointed however when, using his formula, he came up with a minus number, but the rest of us could hardly stop laughing for the rest of the afternoon!

Measuring the external wall thickness was even harder as none of the upstairs windows opened. We eventually measured the thickness through a downstairs window and assumed that it would be same as upstairs. Not very scientific, but the best we could come up with under the circumstances. We also measured the external dimensions of the building at ground floor level and drew those on to our plan. This revealed that one of the upstairs rooms was a very peculiar shape with the wall thickness tapering at one end adjacent to a rather unusual corner fireplace. Lengthy discussion followed as to whether this was due to inaccurate measuring on our part but, as time was running out, we took the executive decision that this was the true shape of the room. Meanwhile the artist and I had been drawing some of the features including fireplaces, window catches and door handles. Many of these were very unusual and interesting to record.

During the day we had all been taking note of the features and idiosyncrasies of the building

in an attempt to come up with date. All of us had different ideas on this with dates ranging from 1066 to the 20th century! Our tutor called us all together for a progress report and to hear our various dating theories. It was heartening to discover that the group recording the ground floor were having similar difficulties to us. Through discussion and gentle prodding from John, we learned that the building had some very early features perhaps dating back to the 12th or 13th centuries. In particular a small stone mullioned window on the first floor was drawn to our attention. It was also evident that some of the beams over the windows on the first floor had been re-used as notches had been cut out of them to house other structures. We also felt that due to a rather odd arrangement of floor timbers, the stairs had been moved at some point. John brought the name of the farm to our attention and revealed that a Priory had once stood on the site. Our conclusions were that some of the stone from the demolished Priory had been used to construct the farmhouse, probably in the 17th century, and that the building may have once been split into two to house two families which had separate staircases. This brought home to me how difficult and fascinating dating a building can be. Although we had come up with different theories, we had all used our knowledge to observe and note the relevant features and many of us were not too wide of the mark.

After this Sherlock Holmes exercise, we were sent off to finish our drawings and to look at the outbuildings, cellar, attic and surrounding landscape. At the end of the day, as darkness fell, we finally congregated to compare notes. To our complete astonishment the measured scale drawings of the ground and first floors almost exactly matched. Maybe we weren't as useless after all! However any thoughts of grandeur were quickly dashed when John produced his three-dimensional drawings of the roof - it made our attempts look rather feeble!

Despite the occasional frustration and argument and the freezing temperatures, an extremely educational and fun day was had by all. We learnt how to measure and record a building and how to use our fledgling knowledge of vernacular architecture to date a building and assess its evolution. Most significantly however we provided a detailed record of an important Oxfordshire building which is now a permanent archive.

## Book Reviews

Well, not strictly books, but some leaflets which have been produced by English Heritage to help owners of historic buildings, but for general interest and for recorders, the information they contain is extremely useful. There are some 80 different ones, so in this issue only a small sample can be covered, but for a full list, call them on 0171 973 3434. The great thing about these is also that they are all free!

### Georgian Joinery, 1660-1840

This leaflet gives some history of the use of timber panelling, with some of the fashions through which it passed, thus giving dating hints. The methods of construction are described, so that owners can be aware of, for example, the need to allow the panels free movement in their grooves to avoid cracking with changes in temperature and humidity. Doors and door-frames are similarly discussed. A very interesting section on cornices follows, showing how these evolved from being entirely of wood, to wood covered in plaster, and finally, in the later part of the 18th century, as the cost of plaster dropped, to be made entirely of that material. Clearly it is important to know what your cornice is made of when restoring or dating a house! There is also a section on shutters and their boxes, showing how these evolved through the period in question from tall folding ones in the late 17th century to vertical ones like sash windows a hundred years later.

Finally, hints are given on how to handle central heating and electricity cables in panelled rooms, and on how to treat the surface. The leaflet is well illustrated with photographs and diagrams giving the correct terms for parts of doors and panelling. Recorders, please note!

### English Heritage Historic Buildings and Monuments Grants

Thinking of restoring a Listed Building? This is the one to read to make sure you are getting all the available grants for repairs. But the leaflet also offers opportunities for building recorders, as grant applicants must provide documentation and reports, so a good survey with suggested dates and illustrations of important features may manage to convince EH to cough up.

#### And finally.....

Want to get more involved? Lost/ never received the previous questionnaire? Don't worry, here is yet another form to fill in. Alternatively, phone on 01865 516414, or John Steane on 01865 514044 or Pat Harding on 01608 676395

Name.....Telephone.....

Address.....e-mail.....

Postcode.....

I would like to help in the following area/s:.....

Please send your form to David Clark, 21 Walton Street, Oxford OX1 2HQ or e-mail at david.clark3@which.net