OXFORDSHIRE BUILDINGS RECORD REPORT OBR.124

Checker Hall Abingdon Abbey Abingdon





Figure 1 The Checker Hall (Unicorn Theatre) from the north

Introduction

The Oxfordshire Buildings Record are grateful to the owners, The Friends of Abingdon, and to Mrs Jenny Berrell, curator, for allowing us access to their property for the purposes of compiling this report as a contribution to the better understanding of Oxfordshire's buildings. We spent a day there on 6 November 2010; the recording team comprised Heather Horner, Georgina MacHugh and Anne Ree. Heather Horner provided most of the material for this report.

The objectives of the survey were to understand the dates and phases of the building.

We made a visual inspection of the exterior and such internal spaces as were accessible. Photographs were taken of significant features. Unless indicated otherwise, text and images were created by members of the recording team. A limited number of historical sources were consulted. The ground plan was measured and drawn. A photocopy of the 1st edition (1876 survey) Ordnance Survey map at 1:500 was obtained.

We are grateful to the Friends for access to their photographic collection and to Julian Munby for the loan of a copy of the OAU report of 1998.

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Please note that this building is open to the public at times indicated by the Friends of Abingdon.

Location (SU 49951 97005)

The Checker Hall is one of the surviving buildings of the great medieval abbey of Abingdon. The building is shown at A2 on the extract from the 1877 edition OS map at Fig.2. A conjectural reconstruction of the abbey precinct at the Dissolution in 1538 is shown in Fig.3. This incorporates evidence from excavations carried out in 1922 and from the various documents relating to the abbey and interpreted by Gabrielle Lambrick. The Checker Hall is a Grade I listed building.

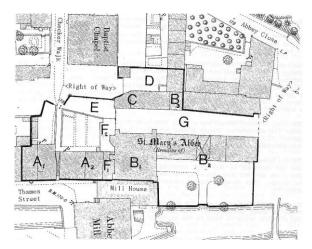


Figure 2 Extract from 1st Ed OS map (1877) annotated to show properties acquired by the Friends of Abingdon (Barnes, 1994)

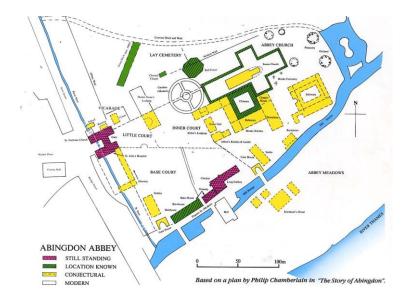


Figure 3 Conjectural plan of the abbey precinct in 1538 (Friends, 1993)

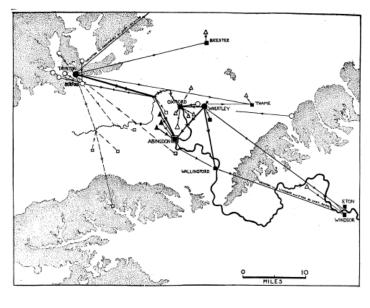
Building Materials and structure

Jope² documented the sources of stone used at the Abbey. Fig.4 shows the sites from which stone for the Abbey was drawn. Taynton and Wheatley stone (a quarry in

¹ Lambrick (1966) pp.16-17; Lambrick (1968) p.42

² Jope (1949)

Wheatley was owned by the Abbey) were used for dressings whilst rough stone came from nearby quarries, possibly Hinksey, Sunningwell or Chilswell.³



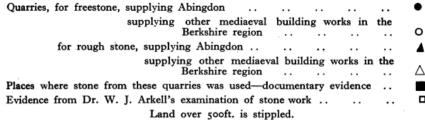


Figure 4 Source of stone for Abingdon Abbey (Jope, 1949)

Structure

The ground plan is shown at Fig. 5, drawn at 1:50 and reduced. Measurements were taken at waist height above the present ground level. Features above this datum are indicated by dotted lines. The pit of the theatre (the bay in which the former stack was placed) appears to be a $20^{\rm th}$ C excavation below the original ground floor level. The pit has not been included in the plan.

The Checker Hall has been inserted lengthwise into a space between two standing buildings, with its roof butted against the two existing gable walls at either end. To the west, the Friends of Abingdon house (No.18 Thames Street) has a gable wall which extends further to the north, wider than the Checker Hall building. A blocked lancet window visible from inside the theatre is probably central in this gable. There is also an external chimney stack towards the south end of the gable, which may have been in situ before the Checker Hall building was erected. To the east, the 13th century Checker building is utilised to support the roof, the massive chimneystack and southwest buttress are both visible from inside the theatre. The tie-beam of the end truss has been sawn though (presumably when an access was created at first floor level from the Checker building).

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³ Arkell 1947, p35

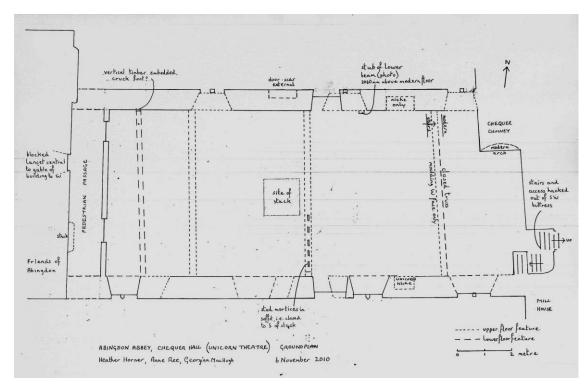


Figure 5 Checker Hall ground plan (H Horner)

Walls

The walls are of roughly shaped and coursed rubble stone, some 750mm (2½ ft) thick, with few dressed quoins. Different sources of stone have influenced the appearance, some light grey (probably Corallian) dressed in large blocks in the western end of the south façade closely resemble the adjacent No.18, while the rest of the wall and the north wall are built of smaller darker stone. This may be the result of more than one phase of construction. There are many scars of re-fenestration in both the north and south wall, visible internally though less obvious externally. Oxford Archaeology made a detailed study of the south wall, and this is shown in Fig.6. Their comments on this are set out in Annex 1.



Figure 6 Archaeological analysis of south checker hall wall (OAU, 1998)

Roof

The roof appears to be all of one date. There are continuous wallplates to north and south, moulded on the inner face, and all the rafters are raised on ashlar pieces. There are three main trusses with moulded tie beams and high arch-braced collars, and



intermediate trusses also with high collars but without the braces or tie-beams Between the trusses are two tiers of buttpurlins, each braced to the principal rafters by curved windbraces.

Figure 7 Checker Hall roof from East (Checker) end

The eastern truss was closed from apex to the ground – there are empty mortices for studs and it is moulded only on the west face (facing into the hall) – Fig.8. At this truss and inside the eastern bay, the purlins are clasped by slightly lower collars (Fig.9).

Figure 8 Ashlar post at S end of closed truss on continuous wallplate, showing moulding on W face of both, plain on E face.



There is a narrow bay between the hall and the stone Checker

building to the east. One purlin with a windbrace continues into this bay, which ends in a further tie-beam truss a short distance from the rear wall of the Checker.



There are few pegs visible from ground level, it is likely that the roof was pegged from the outside.

Figure 9 Closed truss from W, moulded W face of tie, plain on E face inside east bay

The common rafters have been replaced with ones of small scantling in some bays where roof dormers and the central stack had been inserted (Figs. 10, 11).

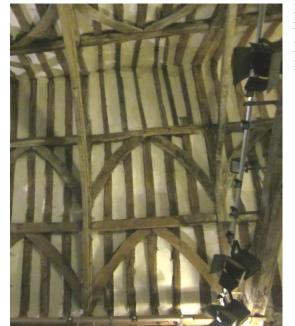


Figure 10 (left) Roof showing position of former stack

Figure 11 Roof to east of central truss showing position of roof dormer (foot)



By the 19th century the Checker Hall had domestic accommodation on three levels. The tie-beams have evidence for joists running east-west to support an attic floor, and there was a first floor inserted within the main hall structure, partly supported by the central stack. As far as internal partitions are concerned, the central tie beam has mortices for studs in the soffit of its southern half, and the western truss has evidence of mortices in the collar soffit.



Two cross beams to support the first floor survive, one under the (formerly) closed truss at the east bay, the other currently used to support the proscenium of the theatre at the west end. It seems likely that these supported joists and a plank floor.

Stubs of further beams supporting the first floor are visible in the walls, presumably cut off when the building was converted to a theatre (Fig.12).

Figure 12 Stub of first floor beam, N wall, showing tenons for joists.

Under the N end of the W beam, a vertical timber set in the wall has been identified as part of a base cruck. If this is correct, it must survive from an earlier building on the site.

The western beam has wide chamfers (2½ inches, 65mm) without stops, and the only carpenter's assembly mark observed on our visit, a scribed ll at the SW end.

There is no evidence for an undercroft, but what there was has probably gone during excavation of the theatre pit. Given the proximity of the river, full cellars are unlikely.

Heating and Lighting

There is no sign of smoke blackening on any of the roof timbers. 19th century photographs show a central stone stack, removed at conversion to a theatre in the 1950s. The position of the former stack is visible in the roof apex just to the west of the central truss. There is no other evidence of heating.



Figure 13 South elevation

The building has had many changes to its fenestration. Some of the upper windows and dormers are likely to have been blocked or removed at the conversion. The lower windows and doors in the south wall (Fig.13) and the surviving upper windows in the north wall (Fig.14) have a modern appearance, with neatly dressed but plain stone reveals and mullions. Splays and scars of at

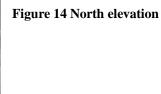
least three windows to the north elevation are visible internally, and at least two of the blocked splays in the south wall appear to be larger than any surviving fenestration.



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The original access, both from the outside and internal circulation, is obscure. At some point, access from the Checker was created by hacking a doorway, dressed with a four-centred Tudor arch, through the west wall of the earlier building at first floor level. A stone stairway to the attic floor has been created using the existing SW buttress of the Checker. This may also have extended down to the ground floor of the narrow east bay.

Figure 15 Entrance to slype: modern archway (and window) dressing a rough cut through the earlier Checker Hall wall.





The pedestrian access from Thames Street to the Abbey precincts has been roughly cut out of the Chequer building at some stage. A brick partition wall has been inserted to form an alley way or slype (Fig.15)

Documentary History

Gabrielle Lambrick carried out extensive research in the 1960s on the documentary evidence for the various buildings on the site up to 1538.⁴ While the church and claustral buildings are known from archaeology, and the documentary evidence for the positions of the infirmary (to the SE of the church) and the almonry (associated with St John's hospital near the western gate) is fairly clear, that for a number of other buildings is less so. Amyce recorded the surviving buildings in 1554, showing that the abbot's lodgings had a "hall, buttery, pantry, kitchen, two fair large chambers called the king's and queen's chambers, a chapel with divers other chambers, and houses of office for these, well built of freestone and some covered with lead, others with slate". He also described a malthouse, brewhouse and bakehouse, *garnet*, late chequer, long gallery, late carter's stable and a slaughterhouse. He also noted a double stable in the base court.

The key question is how to relate these survivals with the buildings known only from the documents, including a treasury, library, servants' dining hall, the prior's lodgings, the monks' guest house, and the hospice of the keeper of the works which had in 1428 a high chamber with parlour under, with workyard and a small garden between the chamber and the running water. There was also in 1428/9 a chamberlain's hospice, with a hall and an exchequer room.⁵

After the Dissolution, the remaining Abbey buildings were sold in 1553 for £600 to William Blacknall, a miller from Swallowfield, Berks. He was mayor of Abingdon in 1565-6, and by 1578 he was living at a house in the abbey grounds called the Garner. Ownership of the buildings continued in the family until 1629 when the daughter of John Blacknall (d.1625) married into the Verney family of Claydon. The Checker and Long Gallery eventually became the property of Abingdon Municipal Charities, who sold them to the recently formed Friends of Abingdon in 1946.

Many of the surviving buildings were used as a brewery, and continued to be used as such until 1887, when it was acquired by Morlands. A 'Plan of the Abbey and Brewery AD 1867' signed by 'N.P.P' was later traced by A W Woodruff, and photocopied by Elizabeth Drury. This shows the building layout at the time (Fig.16)

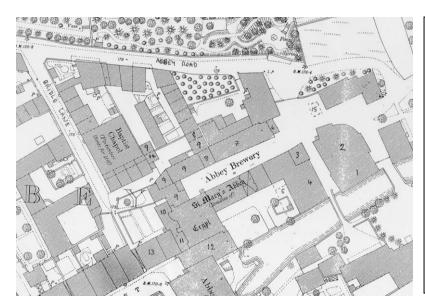
⁴ Lambrick (1968)

⁵ Lambrick (1968)

⁶ Preston (1929) p.84; Steane (2008) p.27

⁷ Steane (2008) p.31

⁸ Barnes (1994) p.5



KEY

- 1. First House
- 2. Brewery
- 3. Office
- 4. Second House
- 5. Lumber room
- 6. Barn House
- 7. Store rooms
- 8. Coach House
- 9. Stables
- 10. Back House
- 11. Larder
- 12. Mr Sharps (sic)
- 13. Cottages (Mr Sharpes)
- 14. Store Room
- 15. Old Office

Figure 16 1st ed OS (1877) with buildings noted on 1867 plan of brewery

The Checker hall is clearly identified at 13 as 'Mr Sharpes' cottages. These are illustrated in a late 19th century photograph (Fig.17)



Figure 17 The Checker Hall as cottages (Thomas, 1979)

This clearly shows the massive central stack and various windows, including three sloping-roofed dormers on the north elevation. In the late 19th century the cottages belonged to the Dockar Drysdales of Radley. They were drawn by local architect J G T West in 1890 prior to an intended renovation, some aspects of which are noted on the drawings (Figs. 18 & 19). In any event, the aspect of the buildings when viewed from Thames Street is very much as it is today (Fig.20) allowing for the blocking of a number of the windows.

The conversion of the cottages in the 1950s to house the Unicorn Theatre is lightly documented in the Friends' archives. As the objective was to create an open hall, the work specification details the removal of internal staircases, chimneystack and partitions. It seems, however, that the intention was to consolidate the gallery and east end staircase, retaining what was usable from the earlier structure. The roof timbers were to be repaired and/or renewed as necessary. Funds were limited, so unnecessary expenditure was avoided.

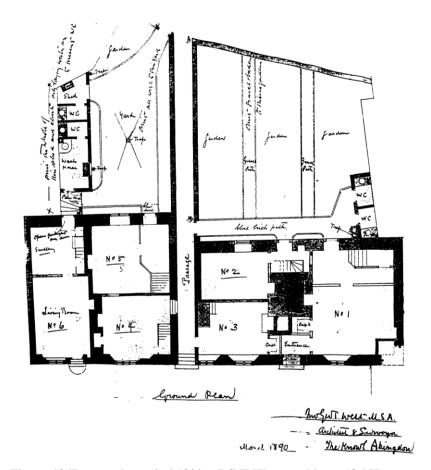


Figure 18 'Proposed repairs' 1890 – J G T West, architect (OAU)

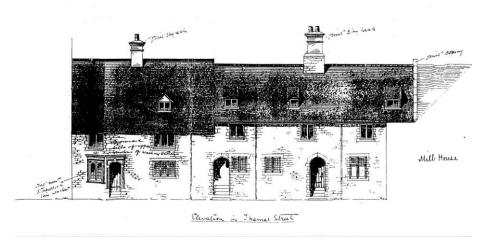


Figure 19 South elevation for proposed repairs 1890 (OAU)

Walter Godfrey felt that the Checker Hall was butted against the east wall of the abbey granary – in effect a storage barn such as that for New College in Oxford – with the east end converted for use as a bakehouse. It was bought by the Corporation of Abingdon in 1637 for use as a bridewell. Godfrey thought that the shell of the Checker Hall might be 14th century, with the eastern bay which 'always had a third

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⁹ Baker (1949) p.12

storey or loft'. 10 The central stack he felt was 'later'. His section drawing is shown in Fig. 21.



Figure 20 Thames Street elevation (2009)

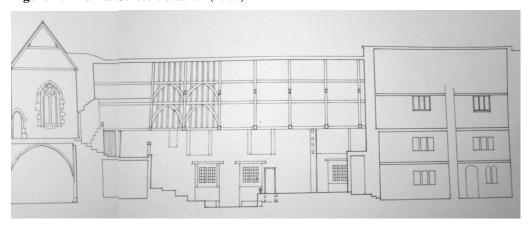


Figure 21 Abbey buildings (W H Godfrey, 1958/9, Friends of Abingdon)

Discussion

The only datable feature in the Checker Hall is the roof, which seems to be all of one phase and mid 15th century, based on the clasped purlin and windbraced construction with ashlar pieces and moulded wall-plates and tie-beams. The roof seems, however, to be the result of a later phase in which earlier structures were unified. One of these was the Checker, attributed to the 1260s, but at the west a fragment of a cruck survives in the north wall. This may be related to the base cruck and double tie-beam structure discovered in 18 Thames Street next door and likely to date from around 1300.¹¹ There is conflicting evidence as to the western section. Externally the stonework of the hall seems continuous with that of the Friends' office, but this could be a result of the 20th century renovations, as the presence of a lancet and stack in the gable wall visible from the hall demonstrates that the Checker Hall is the later building.

The narrow bay at the east end could have been a smoke bay (if the building is domestic) or a passage, or a staircase bay (if there was a first floor). We are divided as to the likely layout of the Checker Hall when first built. It is indeed possible that the hall had a central stack and first floor when built, in which case a domestic use is

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¹⁰ op cit. p.13

¹¹ see OBR 283 and South Midlands Archaeology 47 (2017) p.77

indicated, the staircase being within the narrow bay adjacent to the Checker. On the other hand the beams supporting a first floor could be later insertions as the impressive roof carpentry was probably intended to be seen. The moulded beams and plates suggest a space of some status.

The doorway inserted in the west wall of the Checker has a four-centred arch which could be as late as the 16th century and the sawing through of the tie-beam is probably contemporary with doorway, and so both are of a later phase, along with the stone steps - which relate to the use of the attic space for something. The position of the central chimneystack suggests a 17th century lobby-entry layout, rather than a 15th century one.

The identification of the Checker with the 'late chequer' described by Amyce, and the supposition that he described the buildings in order as he toured the site has led to the interpretation of the checker hall as the *garnet*. Other terms used for this building are 'granatory' and 'garner'. In each case the linguistic link with the *granatarius* – the official responsible for managing the storage and use of the abbey's grain – is clear. He would have needed a dwelling and a granary, but the difficulty is that the Checker Hall seems on architectural grounds to accord with neither of these requirements, unless one accepts that it was a heated domestic building. On the other hand we must take seriously Godfrey's interpretation of the Friends' offices as the abbey's storage barn. This is supported by the presence of a ventilation slit but the survival of a base cruck truss within suggests that it began as a higher status structure, quite likely to have come down in the world by the Dissolution. Thus the early phase might have consisted of the granator's house being inserted between the barn and the Checker. By the time of Amyce's visit, part of the barn had been converted to the brewhouse and bakehouse, and perhaps the hall was indeed being used as a granary.

The post-medieval history is also somewhat confused. Blacknall, when he acquired the abbey site, lived in a house called the garner, which all writers equate with the Checker Hall. 12 Thus either he returned the building to its former domestic state, or, more likely, inserted the stack and at least one floor to create a more up-to-date lobbyentry dwelling. He may even have been responsible for opening the access to the Checker and creating attic space in the Hall. A later phase evident in the building is of division into at least three cottages, with accommodation on three floors. This phase also entailed additional doorways, windows and the insertion of staircases, three of which are identified in architects' drawings. The conversion into a theatre in the 1950s involved removal of the stack and the roof dormers, their locations clearly marked by the use of replacement rafters of smaller scantling.

Conclusion

As is often the case, architectural examination can raise more questions than it solves. The Checker Hall is clearly a multi-phase building, becoming a unified entity in the 15th century with earlier structures and infill buildings being linked by a roof and floor structure possibly designed for domestic use. The connection with the Checker may not be contemporary and is unhelpful in identifying its purpose. A possible explanation is that it was built as a domestic building which was used as a granary in

¹² eg Cox ((1993) p.11

the period before the Dissolution. It was probably returned to domestic use thereafter and in the 19th century was three cottages. Conversion to a theatre involved the loss of possible evidence, but in the 1950s recording such fabric was seldom undertaken. The survival of the architect's drawings from the 1930s is thus particularly valuable.

Disclaimer

This report has been prepared by member(s) of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record, a voluntary organisation whose objectives are to advance education and promote research on the buildings of Oxfordshire. Whereas every effort has been made to ensure its accuracy, it is based only on evidence which was visible at the time of the recording. The information and discussion contained in it is intended as a contribution to research, and the OBR takes no responsibility for any other use to which it may be put. Advice should always be sought from those professionally qualified to give it.

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21 December 2010

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Annex 1 THE DOMESTIC BUILDINGS OF ABINGDON ABBEY

Rectified photographic survey and analysis of the south elevation

Summary of Oxford Archaeological Unit report October 1998 (ABABBS 840/97 – 98/21). The work was limited to the southern elevation of the buildings on Thames Street and the Long Gallery and the eastern elevation of the Checker, where a repointing project was planned. The Downland Partnership carried out a rectified photographic survey of the elevations which the Oxford Archaeological Unit used, with architects drawings, to create an interpretative overlay showing all observed archaeological features.

The Unicorn Theatre Building - The Checker Hall

The eastern end of the Thames Street range is currently used as the Unicorn Theatre. The building was previously known as the 'Chequer Hall' but this is thought to be a 20th century term (Barnes, 1994, 16). Although covered by one roof, dated to the mid-15th century (Cox, 1993, 6), the building fabric suggests that the building is of two phases. From the change in roof height [11] the western building fabric type spans c5.25m where a straight joint in the fabric marked by the quoin stones of the eastern building [12], marks the division. West of this division line the fabric is the same as that for the Friends of Abingdon Office building, ie; it is characterised by larger, squared blocks of white-grey limestone laid in courses in the lower part of the wall with smaller irregular rubble pieces laid less uniformly to the upper half. To the east of the division line-the walling material is of the same general limestone type but is of large, squared, coursed blocks throughout its build.



Plate 1 1885 photograph (OAU)

16 & 17] are all early 20th century inserts (Completed by 1930's photograph - Plate 2).

The cl885 photograph (Plate 1) shows that they replaced two square headed door openings and three casement windows, the eastern most example being set vertically rather than, horizontally. The blocked window [18] to the west of the eastern door was already blocked in the cl885 photograph.

Plate 2 1930s view - stack survives (OAU)

It appears to have been of a similar pattern to the 20th-century replacements and is clearly inserted

Again the features seen in this elevation relate in the most part to the sequence of functional conversions that the building has been subject to. The current stone surrounded doors [13] (providing access to the slype giving access to the rear of the property) & [15] and the stone open windows [14,



into the quoin line of the eastern building. Its blocking includes tile and brick material. Additionally below this blocked window is an area of patching that could be evidence that originally the window opening was vertically set as the easternmost example on the cl885 photograph.

Along the first floor level of the wall are three blocked window openings [19 x 3]. The openings are marked by fairly substantial quoins. The blocking contains a reddish stone, noticeably different to that seen elsewhere throughout the building. These windows are open in the 1930's historic photograph and it is presumed that they were blocked during the 1940s conversion of the building by the Friends of Abingdon. Again a mixture of styles of wooden casement are suggested by the photographic evidence suggesting a number of secondary dates for the insertion of the openings. The photographs also show three small dormer windows lighting the attic. These were removed during the Friends' conversion, along with the removal of the substantial stone chimney (Barnes, 1994, 16).

Other features seen in the fabric of the range are two possible putlog holes infilled with red bricks [20 to far east in upper part of the wall & 21 to east in office building in lower part of the wall]. To the bottom right corner of the western most blocked first floor window is a shallow niche like recess [22]. Its function is unclear as it is too shallow to hold any form of light or statue and it is not a blocked window light. The feature is carved into the quoin stones of the blocked window.

Discussion

Thames Street Buildings

The original nature of these buildings as bakehouse or granary and Checker Hall has been lost due to the subsequent series of functional changes that have ensured the survival of the buildings. The general nature of the alterations documented by the fabric of the south elevation are the general problems seen in conversions of buildings from one function to a new function - access and light. Presumably originally the number and the size of windows along the range were fewer and smaller, possibly with simple wooden lintels as seen in the blocked example [7]. This type of fenestration would be fitting for such service buildings unlike the ornamentation required and seen in the Long Gallery guesthouse building. The majority of the existing window surrounds are of 20th -century date with historic photographs showing that the fittings being replaced were of a variety of wooden casements of different sizes and phases, but none medieval in nature.

More significant are the changes in walling fabric and roof coverage which suggest the different phases and separate buildings which make up the range. Although currently there are two distinct roof lines, one covering the Friends' office and the other covering the Unicorn Theatre, the fabric suggests a different division. To the west the walling fabric, of the range is characterised by large white-grey shaped blocks to the lower half of the wall and smaller irregular mid-grey rubble to the upper half. This pattern is constant up to the line of quoin stones [12], and therefore spans the two separate roof lines. Past these quoin stones the walls are built of more regular, larger, squared coursed blocks. The quoin stones suggest that the eastern end of the range predates the western building and that at a later date (15th century) the buildings were re-roofed demonstrating the change of division within the range.