THE OXON RECORDER

WINTER 2022

Contents:

The Oxon Recorder is the newsletter of Oxfordshire Buildings Record and is published four times a year. OBR aims to advance education and promote research on the buildings of Oxfordshire by encouraging the recording of buildings and to create and manage a publicly accessible repository of records relating to such buildings.

Keep in touch: visit our website at https://obr.org.uk for more information as well as back copies of the Oxon Recorder, or our facebook page @oxfordshirebuildingsrecord

The next copy date for contributions is 1 March. Please send any contributions or comments to newsletter@obr.org.uk Contributions need to be Word documents with accompanying photographs sent separately in high resolution jpg format.

OBR News

EDITOR OF OXON RECORDER NEEDED

This is the last edition of Oxon Recorder being edited by Richard Farrant and we urgently need a successor.

The OR is published quarterly, and emailed to all OBR members, and a few others - total circulation a little over 200. The editor is a member of the OBR committee, so is party to all that we are doing, and has direct access to key office-holders, so there is usually no lack of material to publish. The editor can also commission or write content. Thereafter it is a matter of getting it into publishable form using whatever program you are familiar with, and then distributing it using email addresses provided by the Membership Secretary.

This is a rewarding task at the heart of the OBR's communication with members (and the outside world, as copies of the newsletter go on our website and are valuable in recruiting new members). To learn more, contact Richard at richardfarrant@waitrose.com for a full job description and further information.

TWITTER

The OBR opened a Twitter account some years ago, and this has been moribund for a while. We decided that it was about time we started tweeting again, but for technical reasons we weren't able to continue with the old account. So we have started a new account, and if you use Twitter please do follow us! Our new Twitter handle is **@OxonBuildings**

ARCHIVING JOHN STEANE'S PAPERS

Having taken a preliminary look at the buildings archive of our former chairman, John Steane, we would like to catalogue it. There are two parts:

1. Drawings: about 100 rolls some of which contain only one drawing (such as the floor plan of a building), while others have all those produced for a book (such as the Archaeology of the Medieval English Monarchy). Each roll has a label giving the name of the building or title of the book. The first task here is to enter the items in a spreadsheet, with size and number of items in each roll. No decision has been made about the eventual place for long-term archiving, but this list will guide that decision.

2. Box files: there are about 15 box files that contain photographs, small drawings and other material (including final reports) on individual buildings. Most of these were private commissions in Oxfordshire, and many were published in Traditional Buildings of the Oxford Region (John Steane and James Ayres, 2013). These documents also need to be entered on a spreadsheet, indicating whether or not the results have been published (in whole or in part) and the nature of the archive – eg. notes, drawings and final report.

The documents are currently at John's house in Summertown, North Oxford. If you would like to help, please contact the Secretary secretary@obr.org.uk

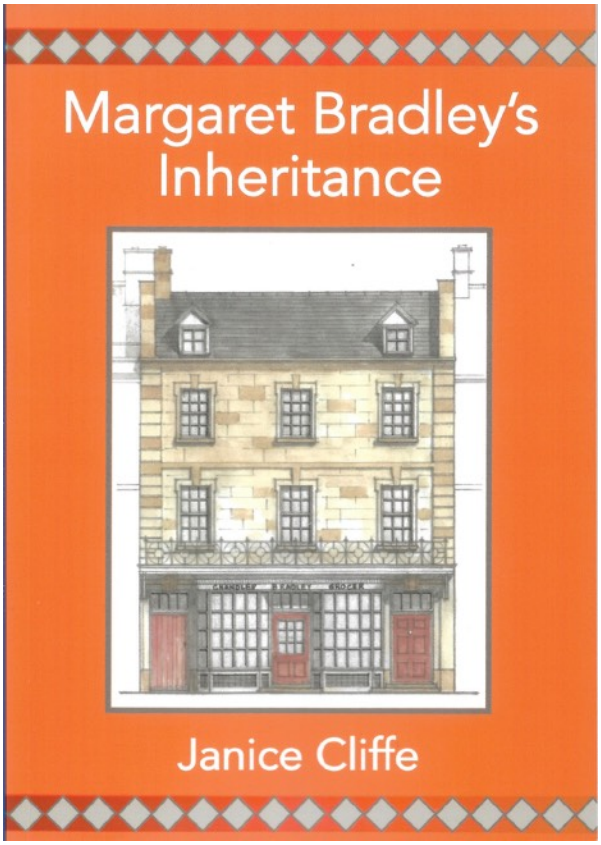
VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE GROUP WINTER CONFERENCE

Exceptionally, this year's VAG winter conference on 7-8 January is open to non members. The title is 'Trans-national connections - Vernacular architecture studies in Britain & beyond". See under 'Forthcoming Events' below for further detail.

'MARGARET BRADLEY'S INHERITANCE'

Jan Cliffe has just published her 6th book about Chipping Norton. This started as a 'lockdown' project inspired by her transcription of an C18th will and inventory.

'Margaret Bradley's Inheritance' is an account of a shop-keeping family in the town. Thomas Bradley arrived in Chipping Norton with his wife in 1702 and soon established himself as a tallow chandler with a house and shop on High Street and became a burgess in the borough corporation. When his spinster daughter Margaret died in 1775 her estate was valued for probate at £16,800, a surprisingly large sum worth over £2 million in today's money. Her inventory contained detailed information about the contents of the house and shop and also a vast property portfolio. Using other contemporary historical documents, Jan has described a way of life led by this family in a rural market town in the Georgian era.



The book can be purchased for £8.00 from Jan. Contact her on 07938 682674, 01608 641057 or Email jan@thecliffefamily.co.uk

OBR BURSARIES.

A reminder that OBR offers bursaries of up to £500 to pay part or all of the fee for courses or conferences which will improve the applicant's ability to record and interpret a vernacular building. Further details are available from the Secretary at secretary@obr.org.uk, and applications should use the form available on the website.

Presentation Day in South Stoke

Over 30 members gathered in South Stoke on 26 November for the annual OBR Presentation Day. As usual, the presentations in the afternoon were preceded by a walking tour in the morning and lunch in the local pub.

The Walking tour

Local historians Michael Sanders and Linda Gatto gave a brief introduction to the village. The Parish of South Stoke and Woodcote, like its neighbours was a long, thin parish stretching from the Thames up into the Chilterns, such that it combined fertile water meadow and high chalk land. A predominantly agricultural community, it nevertheless was crossed by the ancient Icknield Way and more recently in 1838-40 by Brunel's Great Western Railway. Woodcote has more recently been hived off as a separate parish.

Originally named Bishop Stoke, as it belonged to the Bishop of Lincoln, it came to be called Stoke Abbas after being transferred to Eynsham Abbey in 1054. During C14 it became known as South Stoke, to distinguish itself from the nearby settlements of North Stoke and Little Stoke. Eynsham Abbey held the manor until its dissolution in 1539, and in 1546 it was passed to Christ Church College, Oxford. The manor house and its land was leased, which continued until about 1860. Christ Church still owns much of the surrounding land.

Manor Farm was the principal farm, thought originally to have been a monks' monerium. It included granges, fishponds, a large barn, dovecote and granary. Other farms in the village have ceased to be working farms, as enclosure encouraged farms to be disbursed into the countryside.

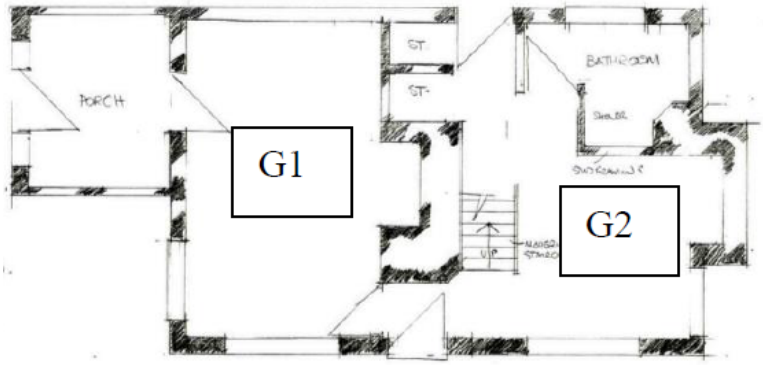
The church is C13 with C14 alterations and mid Victorian restorations made of flint and stone. The former vicarage is a large Victorian house designed by the architect Charles Buckeridge. A non conformist chapel was built in the village in 1820.

The church and east elevation of Manor Farm

The tour took us up the main street, now part of the Ridgeway and Swan's Way long distance footpaths, with a brief detour to see the Manor's main farmyard complex.

Ditton cottage is a lobby entry layout, its timber frame now hidden by an English bonded brick facing. A joist inside is inscribed with the date 1707. David Clark reported that Smewins Cottage next door is another lobby entry cottage, although its stairs are now in the room alongside the central fireplace rather than in line with the lobby entrance. Its timber framing is pit sawn and has chiselled assembly marks, suggesting late C17 construction. There is a large chimney stack at the east elevation and its two entry doors suggest it might have been later subdivided. A mullion window may indicate an earlier origin, in which case could it have earlier been a detached kitchen for Ditton Cottage?

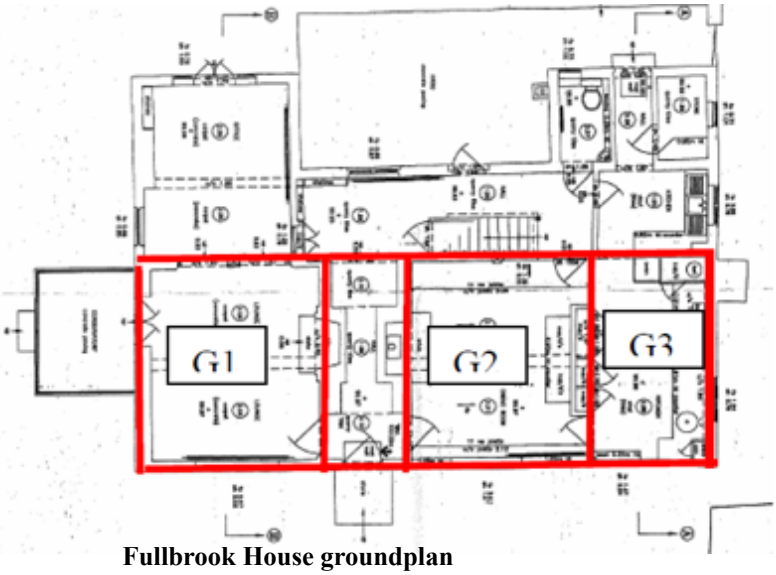
Ditton Cottage



Smewins cottage ground plan

Kate's cottage is impressively timber framed in its appearance, but this seems to be entirely false and not even wood, although inside the house there is some timber framing of considerable age.

Fulbrook House



Fullbrook House groundplan

Fullbrook House is another oddity. As built it is a 4 bay early C.17 lobby entry house, but the central 2nd bay housing the chimney stack is much narrower than its neighbouring bays,

and the 4th bay is also somewhat narrower. There is no evidence where the original staircase was sited in the original house. Could there have been a stair tower to the rear? Could the 4th bay have been a detached kitchen (its fireplace is on the other side of the central passage from the main fireplace, and its chimney is independent of the main stack although alongside it above roof level)? Even more speculatively, could the insertion of the 2nd bay indicate a change of mind during building from a medieval hall ground plan to a lobby entry plan form? Another oddity is the north bay roof structure, which most unusually features structurally separate collars on top of truncated principals. This is unlike the other bays, where the collars are tenoned into the principals which extend to the apex of the roof. David thought this was likely to be part of a C18 reconstruction. The south bay exterior has been subsequently clad in Flemish bonded brick, with a date mark of 1820. Rear extensions and alterations were made in the late C20.

Fullbrook House truncated principal

Devonshire House is another mystery. From the outside it would appear to have originally been a hall house, and it does seem to be genuinely medieval in origin, with smoke blackened timber in the roof. Its grade 2 listing particulars date it as C17.

We were only able to see the Manor Farm yard from outside its boundary just off the main street, but it makes an impressive ensemble of very large barn, equally large dovecote and raised granary. One of David Clark's students had counted the number of pigeon hole roosts - 1544.

Manor Farm west elevation and barn

Manor Farm dovecote, granary and barn

The Corner House is described in its listing description as early C17, with a later C17 main block, but the crown post in the jettied gable suggests a much earlier, probably C15 date. It is timber framed, clad later in brick. The jetty wallplate is moulded on its interior as well as external side.

The Corner House

Corner House moulded jetty wallplate

College Farmhouse is another lobby entry probably C17 house, notable for its impressive 3 flue chimney stacks. It is sited on Ferry Lane which runs down to the Thames, where there was a ferry across to Moulsford provided by the Beetle and Wedge pub - a name that may have referred to this once being the location of an assembly place for timber framing.

College Farm House

The group inspects the Old Chapel

From there we headed back, past the Old Vicarage, a large house built in 1869 typical of that period, to the Old Chapel, built in the 1820's, one of the evangelical non conformist chapels of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. The end wall is Flemish bond in contrast to the English bond on the side wall - were they were built at different times? One end is cantilevered in order to permit farm carts to access the former farmyard behind the chapel.

The tour ended at Stoke Abbas House, late C17 fine brick fronted, featuring typical casement window stays of the period. Then back to the Pike and Perch pub for a generous sandwich lunch.

Stoke Abbas House

Window stay

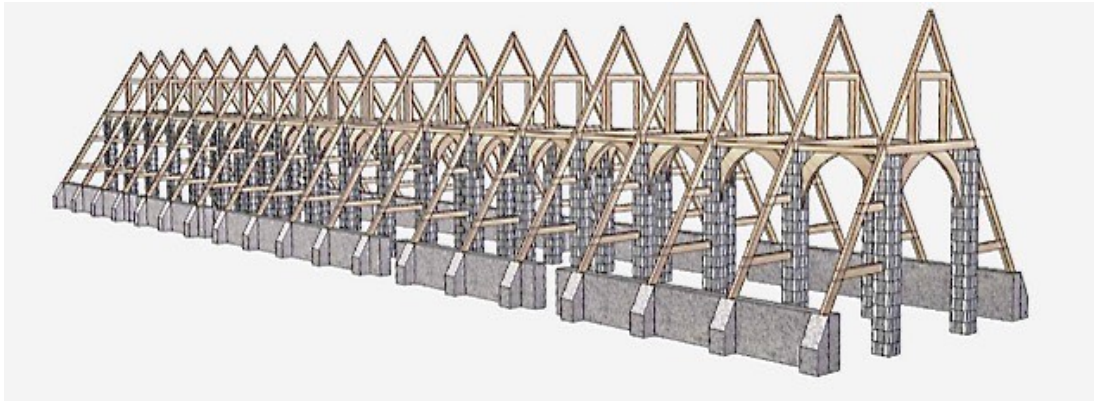
The Presentations

The great barn in Cholsey, *by Ian Wheeler*

The great barn in Cholsey no longer exists, and Ian's interest is to recreate it virtually. It undoubtedly did exist, as it was surveyed by John Buckler in 1815, and there is a roughly contemporary drawing of it by him. It was demolished soon afterwards due to dilapidation, according to "The Gentleman's Magazine in 1816.

The Great Barn in the early C19

Its dimensions were 303' long x 54' wide x 51' tall. Walter Horn, an American academic, wrote in 1963: "The Barn of Cholsey is unusual in several respects. It is not only the longest medieval barn of England of which there is any record, but it probably is the longest building of its type — whether serving as barn, hall or church — ever constructed in the whole of Europe. Moreover, it holds a unique position among all the great monastic barns of Europe as it is one of only three known structures of this kind to have its roof supported, not by posts of timber, but by two rows of free-standing masonry piers." Some timbers thought to have come from it have been dated as C15.



CAD model
© Iain Revell

Ian's first objective is to identify the exact footprint of the barn, which has recently been questioned. It was long supposed to overlap the outline of three later connected Georgian examples currently in use at Manor Farm, which appear to incorporate some of the timbers and stone salvaged from their mediaeval predecessor.

Of equal interest is to establish the construction details, and in particular the use of free-standing masonry piers rather than timber posts to support the roof structure. No one in the audience had ever come across anything remotely similar.

One intriguing detail is that an aquatint image of 1790 depicts the roof as having hipped ends as was usual practice, but John Buckler's image features gable ends.

There is clearly much to explore, and Ian would love to recruit further help or just opinions in order to help the project progress. Researchers, enquiring minds, communicators, computer whizzes, ground penetrating radar experienced? Email ian@cholsey.com or telephone 01491 652295

Lime plaster restoration of the Holy Cross Church, Slapton, *by Michael Reilly*

The exterior of this grade 2* predominantly late C13 to early C14 church was heavily restored using Portland cement render in 1902. The render had deteriorated and, being impermeable, water damage was now being sustained by the underlying fabric. Michael, very experienced in lime plaster work including at Cogges in Witney, was the head plasterer for the renovation work.

Slapton church tower before restoration

The underlying fabric

Michael described hacking off the concrete render to expose the underlying wall rubble fabric, replacing seriously deteriorated parts with stones and roof tiles set in lime plaster mortar, then applying a shelter coating of light lime plaster prior to 4 or 5 coats of protective lime wash.

Replacing serious deteriorated parts

The shelter coating

There was also substantial deterioration of cornices and mullions. This was repaired using a natural cement which sets very hard but remains permeable. This cement is also known as Roman cement although there is no connection with cements used by the Romans.

Throughout the work two key questions always had to be addressed: how much of the existing structure can be retained? And how can we reliably retain it? Using impermeable Portland cement is clearly not the way to do it.

Finishing a cornice

The church restored

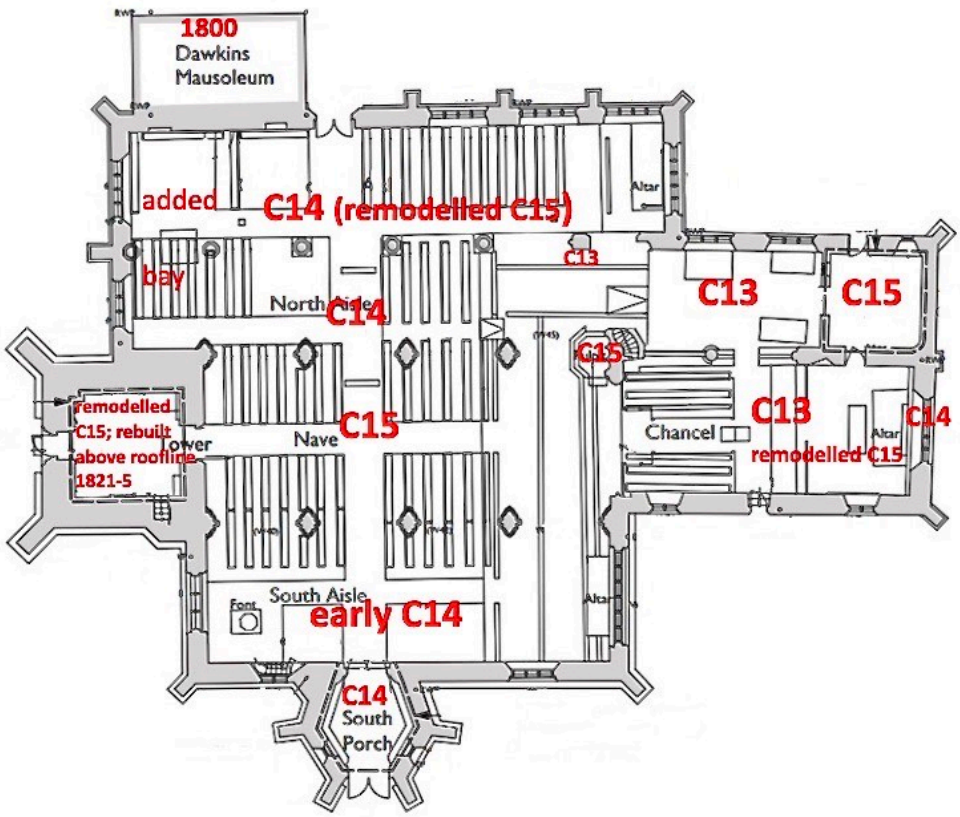
Chipping Norton Church, *by Simon Townley*

Simon spoke about Chipping Norton Church fresh from his editorship of the Victoria County History volume covering the area, with current drafts available for reading and comment free online at https://www.history.ac.uk/research/victoria-county-history/county-histories-progress/oxfordshire/oxfordshire-vol-xxi-chipping-norton-and-environs

Chipping Norton church. South elevation and hexagonal porch © alamy.com

The church existed by 1096, when it was recorded as given to Gloucester Abbey, but the present building is predominantly C13 to C15 , culminating in a major C15 make-over. Its site is unusual in being below the town centre, between town and the castle. The town was planned in the mid C12, while the castle was abandoned in the late C15.

Simon described some interesting features, notably fragments of a former tower arch visible in the internal west wall; evidence of the earlier C13 chancel (probably connected to a new chantry founded in the 1280's) which was subsequently largely remodelled in C15, and the high quality ashlar finish of the C14 south aisle, with its enormous east window the top of which is above roof level. Adjoining the south aisle is a most unusual hexagonal 2 storey entrance porch of the same period. Only two other examples are known, in Bristol and Ludlow.



The highlight of the major C15 make-over was the nave, with the addition of a spectacular clerestory between 1447 and 1460, supported by multi-facetted columns, similar to C15 columns in the nave of Canterbury Cathedral. It is known that the master mason for this work was John Smyth, who also worked at Canterbury. More C15 remodelling took place in the north aisle, possibly incorporating an earlier guild chapel.

Several different parts of the church were restored in C19, the major project being the dismantling in 1817 of the tower and its rebuilding reusing old materials between 1821 and 1825.

Settlement focused research, Chipping and Hook Nortons, *by Paul Clark*

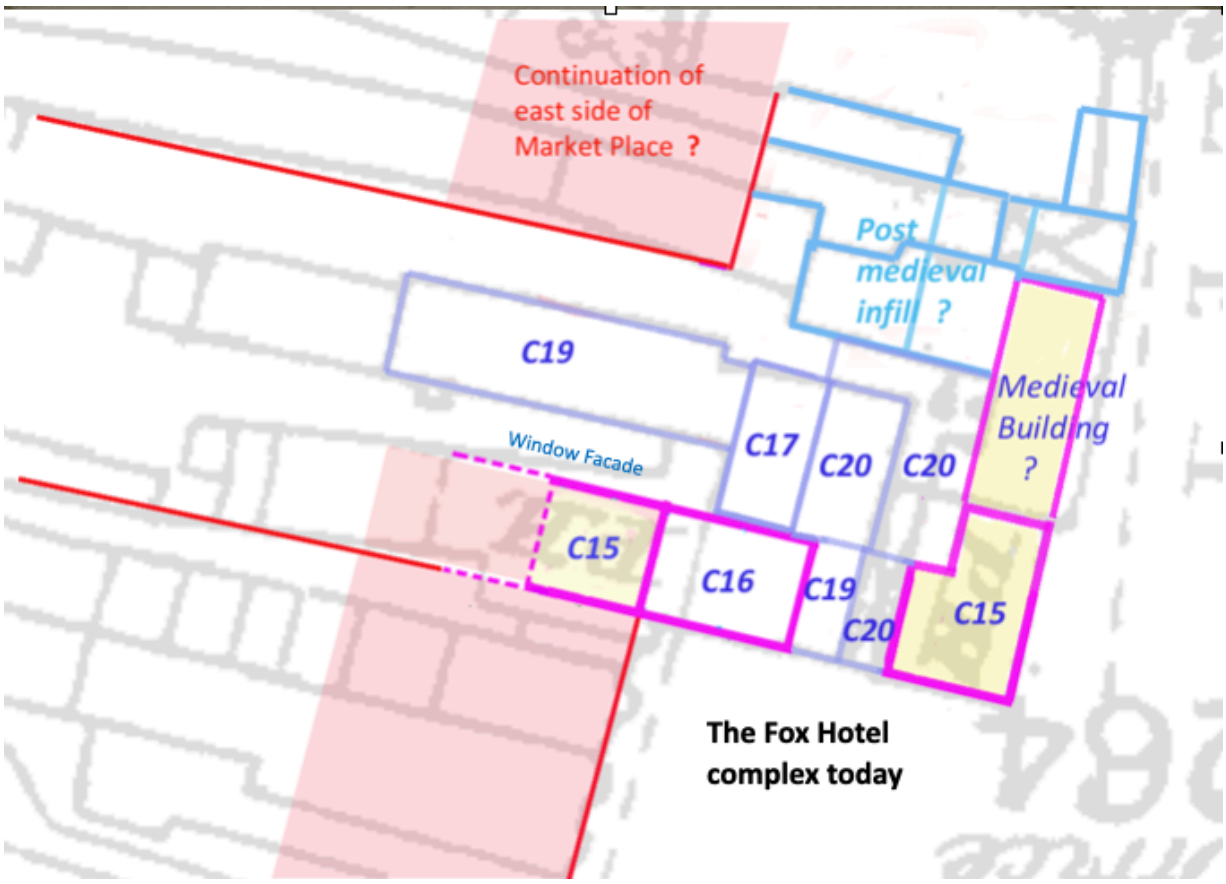
Paul updated us on the recording projects in the two Nortons which are 6 miles from each other, and two outcomes of the research on a broader perspective. Lastly, he wants our help.

Chipping Norton

Hook Norton

Both projects are now beginning to wind down, after surveying 110 buildings, supported by local groups and Historic England in the case of Chipping Norton and Victoria County History in the case of Hook Norton. The findings are informing the drafting of the volume on Chipping Norton and surroundings of the Victoria County History, drafts available for comment at https://www.history.ac.uk/research/victoria-county-history/county-histories-progress/oxfordshire/oxfordshire-vol-xxi-chipping-norton-and-environs. In addition, the Chipping Norton project has spawned a book "The making of Chipping Norton".

Paul reported that further dendro dating work at the Fox Hotel and neighbouring buildings at the south end of the market place has enabled a much better understanding of their successive building phases in the C15 and 16C, such that he was more confident - although one could not yet be sure - that these buildings represented infilling of the market place. Supporting evidence for the phasing includes roof truss styles and ceiling beams, a blocked cellar window, and documentary history of old photographs, maps and plans. He noted that C15 buildings were also included within the infill block at the north end of the market place.



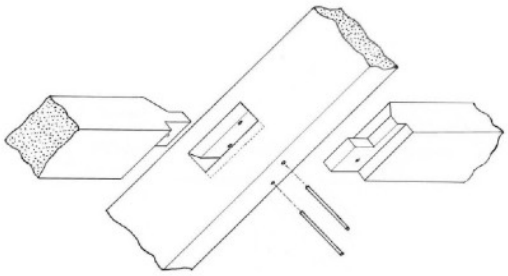
Moving on, Paul noted that the two projects provide an opportunity to compare two geographically closely associated but different settlements, both with each other and with the rest of the region. In both towns, old buildings were almost always solid walled rather than timber framed, and this seems to have influenced their timber roof structures. In particular, there are no clasped purlin trusses in the Nortons, where the longitudinal horizontal side purlins are clasped between the collar and principal rafters. These are very common in South Oxfordshire. There are also very few cruck trusses compared with South Oxfordshire, although there are some raised cruck forms, sitting on the solid walls. Paul showed plans of both towns indicating where different roof truss forms had been identified, with indicative dates of their construction. These indicate some designs were more favoured in Chipping Norton and others in Hook Norton. Notably the raised cruck form ceased to be employed around the end of C14 in Chipping Norton, but continues into C18 outside. On the other hand, butt purlins appear earlier in Chipping Norton, but not until the late C17 outside.

Paul drew two general conclusions from all this. First, roof carpentry was different in north Oxfordshire from the wider regions where there is more timber framing. This would in part have been driven by the readier availability of good limestone for walling and in consequence carpentry skills may have developed less than elsewhere Second, there were persistent differences in roof truss styles between town (Chipping Norton) and villages (Hook Norton), probably reflecting reduced wealth and increased isolation outside town, until

greater movement and the introduction of more national techniques from the late C17 onwards.

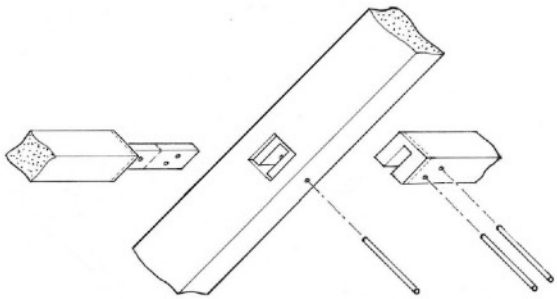
Finally, Paul is asking for help. There are three basic styles of joints which attach side in-line tenoned purlins[1] to roof trusses. Research in Chipping Norton and Hook Norton has suggested that, for these settlements at least, the styles have a chronological sequence, where the type of tenon in the joint changes over time. Nationally, and even within the OBR recordings, little attention seems to have been given to this feature, possibly due to the difficulty in recognising the features within a closed joint. However, if the sequence is not just an anomaly of north Oxfordshire then it could provide a useful tool for dating buildings generally. Unfortunately the quantity of dated examples which we have collected so far is insufficient and too localised to provide a reliable framework of dates. If you do know of any dated examples, please help by contributing to our database.

The following examples are in chronological order, taken from the most reliable dates in Chipping Norton and Hook Norton. Precise details of the tenons, shoulders and housings vary, as do the number of pegs at each position.



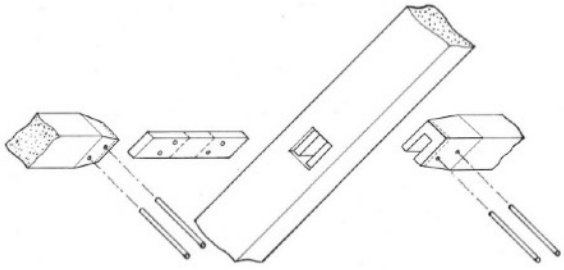
1. Overlapping tenons

Earliest: 1444-1477 (Dendro dated)
Latest: Early 1690s (Carbon dated)



2. Through tenon

Earliest: 1690-1700 (Estimated)
Latest: 1729 (Dendro dated)



3. Loose tenon

Earliest: 1730 (Inscribed date)
Latest: Early C19 (Estimated)

All sketches © Paul Clark & John Marshall

[1] Also referred to as in-line butt purlins.

The through tenon seems to be transitional and relatively short lived before being superseded by the loose tenon, until tenon-purlin trusses are generally superseded by back-purlin trusses in the nineteenth century. However, the later joints may have been adopted earlier than we think as Wood-Jones records a late sixteenth-century roof in Shutford Manor, not far from Hook Norton, with both through tenons and loose tenons.[2] This may be an isolated high status example or perhaps there isn't such a clear chronology as we thought. A larger number of dated examples from the area as well as elsewhere should help us determine if the feature could provide the dating tool we hope for.

A database of loose-tenon joints recorded in OBR Survey Reports is published in the Members Area on our website at https://obr.org.uk/members-area/ with a distribution map at https://obr.org.uk/x-loose-tenons/

Please send any information you may wish to pass onto the OBR to Paul Clark at membership@obr.org.uk

Timber-frame carpentry training, *by Ken Hume*

Ken noted that he and a group of like minded volunteers had raised a new cruck building and built a box framed building in bluebell woods not far from South Stoke. They had learned a lot, and would be delighted to share the practical experience they had acquired more widely with OBR members. It would be a great opportunity to get a real feel for how these old techniques really work. The site even has modern toilet facilities. He would liaise with Felix Lamb about organising a site visit for members, which he suggested should take place in late April or early May, when the bluebells would be in flower.

The OBR inscribed dates project, *by David Clark*

David recalled that this project started in the Covid lockdown, as something that members could do as part of their permitted walk. Its main aim had been to record dates before they were lost. There are now 1300 dates recorded in the spreadsheet, and more are still being reported. Of these over 500 are in Oxford and 100 in Abingdon. There are some major apparent gaps, notably in and around Witney and Adderbury, which he would like to see filled. He encouraged members to look at the spreadsheet on the website, choose and tour a place that looks thinly researched, and then report inscribed dates found, with a photograph if possible, to Heaver Horner via secretary@obr.org.uk

David suggested that the spreadsheet data could in time improve our understanding of the 'Great rebuilding" in the later C16 and C17, an hypothesis originally proposed by WG Hoskins in 1963. Maybe C16 and C17 dates apply to a first phase, while later C18 dates refer to a secondary rebuilding phase. In 1977 Bob Machin produced a graph of dated houses between 1530 and 1759, with the peak occurring around 1680. Nick Hill in 2015 undertook the same analysis for Rutland, with roughly the same peak period. However, Wood Jones recorded an earlier peak in the Banbury region, in the 1650's, with a secondary peak in the 1690's. It will be interesting to see what our new database indicates.

Looking ahead, the data may allow more research on individual locations. It already appears that Marcham may have been a hotspot for rebuilding, prompting the question why? It may be possible to test better whether the hypothesis that date stones are correlated with shaped gables is valid.

David invited other ideas for using the data in the spreadsheet.

Richard Farrant
Photos © the speakers, unless otherwise stated

OBR lecture: "Concealments, graffiti, ritual marks and witch marks; taking a social historical perspective on folk building magic"

Professor Owen Davies of the University of Hertfordshire set out three aims for his lecture: to consider the evidence that concealments of objects - eg. shoes in buildings - have apotropaic significance; to establish whether marks said to be related to witchcraft really do so; and to outline current research on so called 'witches bottles'. What he has sought to do is to seek hard evidence, rather than rely on hypotheses that may have acquired credibility over time on no or little basis of fact.

The discovery of mummified animals (predominantly cats), shoes and horse skulls concealed in buildings is often held to be warning of evil spirits and/or an attempt to deter them. Owen identified three people as particularly instrumental in generating such a belief. Ralph Merrifield, a curator at the Museum of London, noted similar patterns of such deposits in buildings, followed up by June Swan, curator at the Northampton Shoe museum, who believed that shoe deposits were a survival of an ancient belief in sacrifice to benefit a

building, and Tim Easton, who focussed on marks held to be apotropaic. All knew and cooperated with each other.

The suggestion grew that concealment was the survival of pre-christian sacrificial practices and beliefs, such as magic, horse cult and sun worship. Causation for concealment was theorised on the basis of the concealed items they had found, without attaching importance to any other evidence for such beliefs.

Owen's research has sought to look for that independent evidence. He has sought out newspaper and other written accounts of concealment as far back as the C16. Reports of mummified cats quite frequently refer to buying them, which might be attributed to a belief in their magical power, but not until 1912 was there any reference to magic or superstition. The reports just referred to cats having got entombed in wall cavities. The more likely explanation is surely that cats' curiosity or chasing rodents was the cause of their fate.

Similarly, magical motives have been attached to builders' detritus such as cigarette packets being left under floor boards, but there is no independent evidence for this. Surely the more likely reason is that this was the easiest way of disposing of waste without being noticed.

The concealment of shoes is often referred to as apotropaic, being held to be of special significance as the only item of clothing that moulds itself to the human body and therefore representing the owner of the shoe. As such, concealed shoes, often placed in chimneys above the hearth during building renovation, were held to provide protection against evil for the occupants. But the evidence of the news reports provides no support for this. The evidence is mostly that builders habitually concealed shoes during renovation as a tradition - a ritualistic purpose maybe, but not an apotropaic one to ward off evil.

The placement of horse skulls, often in churches, halls and other public places, is also held to be apotropaic. Almost invariably the skulls have had all their flesh and lower jaw removed. However, all the reports say the skulls' placement was for acoustic purposes, and they were usually placed under floor boards or in places such as church belfries where music making, bell ringing or another motive of acoustic improvement makes sense. Often several skulls would be grouped together, the plausible motive being to amplify the effect.

Owen moved on to his second aim, to question whether marks said to be related to witchcraft, for example the double interlocked V, butterfly and hexafoil patterns, really do so. He noted that there are no references to these marks in the literature in those periods when they were created; they just appear in buildings without explanation. Dutch paintings from C16 do often depict marks, but nearly always in inns, brothels or other public spaces. There could be many reasons for such marks, such as gambling or money related tallies or merchants' marks, or simply doodling.

Owen referred to pictures depicting witches in them, in a room or going up its chimney which often also depicted many so called apotropaic marks. But an equally plausible explanation is that the marks were simply a pictorial representation of room decoration, and the presence of the witch is hardly evidence of the protective power of the marks against her.

Turning to the double V and circular patterned marks, Owen noted that common apotropaic marks do not feature in past written references to magic or in notes written by magicians, which seems odd. He thought that an equally plausible explanation for the double V was that it represented the signature W standing for William, which was a very popular first name - indeed the most popular one in C19 censuses. People often used symbols instead of full signatures and a stylised W would be a natural symbol for William. Circular marks may simply be doodling, practicing circular patterns.

Hexfoil mark on post - doodling, spiritual or defensive magic?

Owen mentioned two recent ideas related to Apotropaic marks: 'spirit traps' and 'demon traps'. Spirit traps were supposedly intended to draw and trap evil spirits to a container such as a shoe or bottle, which might be filled with a liquid such as water or urine. Demon traps applied to marks in buildings, usually circular based, said to keep evil spirits away. There is no evidence for either, so both are at present no more than unsupported supposition. He referred to an observer close to the Amish community in USA, in whose barns hex marks are common. The observer maintained that although the hex marks could have a spiritual meaning, they are positively intended and not negatively against evil or witches.

Owen referred to the "witch post" now in the Pitt Rivers museum, and "witch balls" which became described as apotropaic in the early C20. Witch posts seem to have been a mainly Yorkshire feature, and the donor of the Pitt Rivers example noted that he had no idea what had been its purpose. As to witch balls, an article in Country Life in the early C20 seems to have set off the speculation that they had an association with witches. There are other more plausible explanations of their purpose, for example fishing net floats and reflecting amplifiers for candle light. Balls of this type were made in Bristol in the late C19.

Owen's overall conclusion from his research is that there is so much uncertainty in the evidence that it is just as likely that none of these forms of marks were associated with witches, magic or magical qualities. No substantial evidence has yet been produced for the traditional association of apotropaic items with warding off evil. There is too much noise in the evidence to make alternative reliable associations as to their purpose.

Finally, Owen reported that his current project is exploring the witch bottle tradition. He is analysing 150 witch bottle discoveries, which are concentrated in East Anglia. It is known that the bottles were made in Cologne in C17, and they feature in Holland. Easy access across the North Sea probably accounts for their relative popularity in East Anglia rather than further afield. Some contained wine, and they were often found outside buildings, suggesting that if they were used as some form of protection, it was to protect persons rather than buildings.

Altogether, a stimulating dive into a rarely researched area. He certainly convinced me that what we know about these devices is far less than hitherto expert explanations have suggested.

Richard Farrant

Themes and debates in vernacular architecture - Part 2

[Editor's note; Part 1 of this edited version of a lecture appeared in Oxon Recorder 91 for Autumn 2022, available on the OBR website.]

Last time I raised some definitional issues with the term 'vernacular' and contrasted the 'English' approach with the international. In this part I shall look at how UK research is going beyond the 'how was it made' approach to take in ideas and results from research on 'how was it used'.

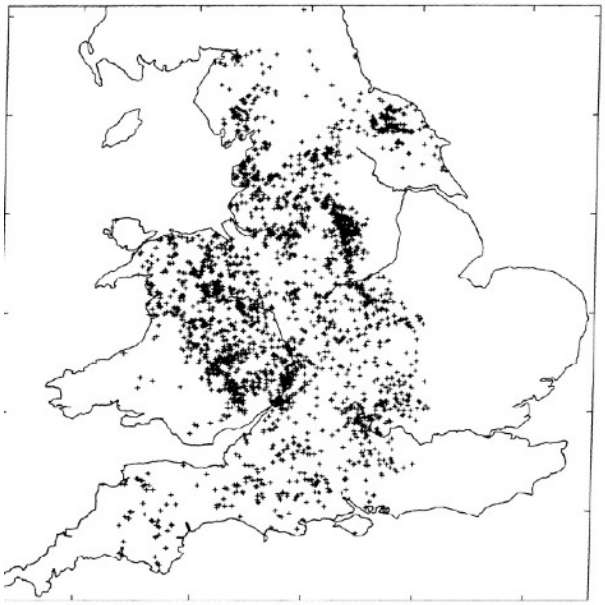


Fig.1 Distribution map of cruck framed buildings (Cruck Catalogue, 1981)

I'll start with a brief look at how this works in the field of cruck-framed houses (Fig. 1). Two important books on this subject have been published in recent years. The first (in 2013) was The Medieval Peasant House in Midland England, which made available the results of a major project focussed on cruck houses, many of which are in Oxfordshire and adjacent counties. 111 houses were recorded, dating from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, and mostly built by peasant farmers – using the term to mean anyone with a small landholding of 30 acres or less (page 106). Underpinning this study was a programme of tree-ring dating, which, while not successful in giving precise dates for all the buildings, allowed carpentry features to be given a chronology that could be applied where accurate dates were unavailable. Thus we can now be more precise about the date ranges for the various different types of scarf joint and can almost read the minds of the carpenters as they tried to find a stronger alternative to the simple splayed scarf which we find in the fourteenth century (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2 Splayed-and-tabled scarf joint, 1356 (Steventon)

Other cruck features have a geographical distribution, in particular the way in which the cruck blades are joined at the apex, where they invariably support a ridge – in contrast to the box-framed building which usually do not have ridge pieces. There does not seem to be a consensus as to why there is a geographical diversity of these apex types, although once established in an area, their use would have become part of the local carpentry tradition. The later book, Cruck Building: a Survey (2019) was based on papers given at a weekend school at Rewley House and built on the considerable corpus of scholarship carried out by members of the Vernacular Architecture Group from its foundation in 1952. This was also largely concerned with carpentry, with detailed papers on a variety of regional traditions. In a somewhat parallel universe, a number of groups also concern themselves with 'experimental archaeology' by creating and erecting new cruck buildings in order to demonstrate the techniques involved.

Fig. 3 New Oak Frame Cruck House (© Hewnwood Oak Frame UK)

While the questions raised by this – why are there no cruck buildings in East Anglia, can the distribution of apex types be 'explained', what is the relationship (if any) between 'true crucks' and 'base crucks' (which terminate at a tie-beam, and have a different geographical distribution) – are all valid, and the answers worth pursuing, broader issues that we looked at in Part 1 are only now being addressed. The detailed examination of the buildings for The Medieval Peasant House in Midland England showed, for example, that in the study area, the cruck houses catered for diverse lifestyles, and such features thought to be universal in the medieval rural house, such as two-bay halls and service doorways, were found to have geographical diversity. So, while most of the Oxfordshire houses had two-bay halls, in the counties to the north, a single bay was the norm. And the paired doorways to buttery and pantry were nowhere to be seen (Fig. 4). The traditional view that small cottages were for

the poorer peasants and have largely gone, while the bigger and better houses of the yeomen farmers have survived, has also been thoroughly undermined – largely through the work of researchers such as Chris Dyer who have managed to link the buildings archaeology with the documentary evidence. His chapter on this in The Medieval Peasant House in Midland England is essential reading.

Fig. 4 Buttery and Pantry doors in North Cray House at the Weald and Downland Living Museum

Another area in which attempts are being made to bring the archaeology and the anthropology together is that of the so-called Wealden building type – recognisable by its recessed hall spanned by a braced flying wall-plate. Although in some places the recessed hall has been filled in, this is generally easy to detect. The name comes from the Weald area in Kent and Sussex where there are many (largely rural) examples. And therein lies one of the interesting questions: there is a scatter of other Wealdens in the rest of the country, but these are all in towns, and have gable-end pitched roofs rather that hipped roofs. These buildings date from 1340 to 1525, and the earliest dated examples are in towns. The 1340 building is in Winchester, and other examples can be seen in Lavenham, Wallingford and Stratford-on-Avon; there was one in Oxford (probably in Hollybush Row) which J C Buckler drew in the early nineteenth century (Fig. 5), though it has since been demolished. There is a particularly interesting row of (restored) half-wealdens in Coventry. Did the type originate in urban settings outside the south-east as a stylish form, suitable for shop use and adaptable to form terraces? I am not aware that the documentary sources have yet been fully examined for evidence.

Fig. 5 Old House in St Thomas' Parish, Oxford Augt. 23d 1821 (J C Buckler B.M. Add. M.S 36376 f.159 reproduced in Oxoniensia XXXIX (1974)

In part 3 I'll look at some aspects of the conservation of historic buildings and the debates over the role that open-air museums have played in this.

The buildings recorded in The Medieval Peasant House in Midland England can be seen at Library (archaeologydataservice.ac.uk)

The full cruck database is at Cruck Database: Introduction (archaeologydataservice.ac.uk) and the Wealden database at Wealden Houses Database: Introduction (archaeologydataservice.ac.uk)

David Clark

Forthcoming Events

Vernacular Architecture Group

The VAG's winter conference is open to all and will explore '**Trans-National Connections - Vernacular Architecture in Britain & Beyond**'. It will be held at College Court, University of Leicester, on 7-8 January 2023. "Vernacular architecture studies in the UK have often focused on local places and regions within the nations of England, Scotland and Wales. This conference aims to widen our horizons and look at the connections between architecture in Britain and patterns of building in Europe, Scandinavia and across the Atlantic. Speakers will address the theme of building traditions in Britain and their relationship to patterns elsewhere. Papers focusing on Sweden, Dutch houses, France, and the Channel Islands, sit alongside investigations into roof and wall construction in Britain and Europe, and 'trans-national' connections within Britain on the Anglo-Welsh and Anglo-Scottish Borders, as well as around the Irish Sea, and in Shetland and the North Atlantic Isles."

A brochure with full details and booking form are on the VAG website at https://www.vag.org.uk. The closing date for bookings is **15 December 2022.**

Oxfordshire Local History Association

OBR belongs to the OHLA and members can participate in its events. See its website ((http://www.olha.org.uk/events/talks-and-meetings/) for listings and details of events and talks at local history societies throughout Oxfordshire.

Oxford Architectural and Historical Society

The OAHS has a programme of lectures and local guided walk excursions throughout the year for its members (£18 pa individual membership). Go to oahs.org.uk for further details.

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