

The OXON RECORDER

The Newsletter of the Oxfordshire Buildings
Record

Issue 93 March 2023



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Secretary's Note

Unfortunately, we have had to say farewell to Richard Farrant as editor of the Oxon Recorder since 2015. Our search for a replacement has not yet borne fruit so I have lashed up this edition to fill in the gap. A big thank-you to all contributors.

At the end of the newsletter is the agenda for this year's AGM. If you would like to join the committee, please complete the attached form.

Recording Day 26 March (Lyford, Vale of White Horse)



Figure 1 Lyford almshouses from the east

We have been invited by the Trustees of the Oliver Ashcombe Almshouses in Lyford (Fig. 1) to record this building in order to establish its dates and phases. David Clark and Heather Horner made a preliminary visit there on 13 January 2023, and established that the uniform layout shown in Fig. 1 is the result of at least four building phases. The almshouses were endowed by Oliver Ashcombe (of Manor Farm, Lyford) in his Will of 1611, but we saw no evidence of any fabric from this date. Why would a small rural charity have rebuilt the original almshouses 150 years later? Did they burn down, or were they in fact built in the eighteenth century? The central focus of the courtyard is a chapel, but the Will makes no mention of a chapel (and the parish church is just a short distance away). All that was provided for was

money to support a priest to read from the bible to the almsmen and women. So is the chapel a later building? These are only a few of the intriguing questions raised by this apparently simple building – so come and learn some house detective skills as you try to untangle the story.

The recording day will be Sunday 26 March at 10am – note the clocks go back that morning so be sure you get up in time! All levels of experience are welcome. Please register your interest by emailing secretary@obr.org.uk. There will be limits to the numbers, and so we will operate a first-come-first-served approach. Please respond by 14 March. After that you will get a confirmation with final details of how to get there and what to bring.

Vernacular Architecture Group Conference (7-8 January 2023, Leicester)

Trans-National Connections: Vernacular Architecture in Britain and Beyond

This was the first 'in-person' VAG conference since January 2020 and it was clear from the attendance figures that members were keen to return to the traditional format, doing what members were born to do: meeting up again with friends and colleagues, discussing the papers, and buying books. Five OBR members (or perhaps six – one never knows exactly when members who have not paid their subscriptions are cast into outer darkness) were present, and some of them share their thoughts below.

What made North Atlantic buildings (dis)similar? (Ian Tait)

Ian considered the buildings of a group of North Atlantic Islands: Faroe, Shetland, Orkney and the (outer) Hebrides. At first glance, these places might appear similar and to have shared histories. However, Ian teased out substantial differences demonstrating the impact this has had on buildings. Settled at different times – the Neolithic in Orkney through to the Iron Age in Faroe – all, apart from the Hebrides, have had a period of Norwegian occupation.



Figure 2 Faeroese turf-roofed house in Kunoy Village, on the island of Kunoy.¹

¹ <https://www.flickr.com/photos/baronreznik/28590501946/> [accessed January 2023]

Roofs were one point of difference. The Norwegian style is to use a turf roof, but these have to be separated from the timber structure beneath by a layer of birch bark. Since this is not available in any of the islands, it had to be imported from Norway itself. Hence, Faroe is the only one of the islands to have continued this tradition, remaining under Scandinavian control for far longer in its history than the others. Shetland was the next longest within the Scandinavian orbit, and it had a history of turf roofs, including



Figure 3 Stone roof flags in Hoy, Orkney (David Clark)

gables made in turf, as opposed to stone. However, today that tradition has died, where Faroe keeps it alive, seeing it as good for tourism. Faroe, in general, employs more timber than the other islands, including sarking boards, barge boards and wooden fascia. Faroe was also able to upgrade its vernacular architecture more easily to two storey dwellings, and it imported glass for windows at an earlier date. In the absence of imports from elsewhere, other islands turned to their indigenous materials. Orkney abounds in sandstone. Walls, partitions, cupboards, dressers and beds are made of it. Stone roof flags are a particular Orcadian speciality.



The geology of the Hebrides is dominated by gneiss, whilst that of Faroe by basalt. The Hebrides also built in stone but with very thick walls and an earth core, into which water was shed – a far more Viking design than any of the other islands. Roofs were of heather thatch weighted down to withstand the wind by rocks hung on string. In a place where the source of wood was drift wood alone, the scantlings of the roof timbers vary considerably. Some gables had ledges in which to lodge the purlins. Others were hipped with a post protruding through the roof to which the end roof spars joined. When upgraded at a later date with gable-end chimneys, those chimneys would typically protrude through the hipped roof in the same manner.

Figure 4 Houses in the northern half of the village on the now deserted island of Mingulay, 1905²

Thatching is suffering the same problems as elsewhere. Black oats were typically used but are no longer produced, since they are not mechanically harvestable. In the 1990s in Shetland there were 30 thatched roofs, now there are only 2. In the Hebrides, again thanks to tourism, thatched longhouses are being revived. However, not without some change; thatch is often laid down over the top of anachronistic mineral felt.

² Taken from *Vernacular Buildings of the Outer Hebrides 300 BC–AD 1930: Temporal comparison using archaeological analysis* by George Geddes, Section 2.2.
<https://intarch.ac.uk/journal/issue19/4/toc.html> [accessed January 2023]



Figure 5 Gearrannan blackhouse village³

Mills were discussed. Such mills dot the landscape of all of the islands; each could handle the milling for an individual family or farm. In a land of subsistence farming, centralised mills and manorial-like control did not materialise. Another particularly interesting vernacular building type highlighted was the grain-dryer: essential for the northern island climate, and situated near the mills, it was typically square in Faroe but round in the Hebrides.

Abigail Lloyd

Dutch urban housing landscape (c.1150-1650): timber frames, bricks and stone; geographical similarities and differences. (Gabri van Tussenbroek)

Gabri began by reviewing the development of cities in the Netherlands from the six small places known in the tenth and eleventh centuries, the growth of new sites such as Leiden in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, to the growth of the ‘harbour towns’ such as Bruges and Ghent. Few timber buildings survive – fires saw to that – but stone and brick survivals can be seen in these places and in Utrecht, Deventer, Arnhem and s’Hertogenbosch. Characteristics of these houses include stair turrets (tourelles) shaped gables facing the street, cellars – often let to separate tenants – and height, with three floors above ground. Some early common-rafter roofs survive, rather more of the later curved principal roofs needed after 1500 to support the popular pantiles. The last of the timber-framed town buildings were encased in brick or stone, thereby reducing fire risk, while in rural areas where this was not done, few houses from before 1600 survive.



Figure 6 90 Warmoesstraat Amsterdam⁴

He ended with a brief case-study based on his forthcoming book on the buildings of Amsterdam.⁵ The city grew rapidly after 1550, with brick a favoured material, though the foundations had to be supported on timber piles 12m long forced into the soft coastal ground. Houses with

³ <http://www.gearrannan.com/> [accessed January 2023]

⁴ <https://ibecomingdutch.wordpress.com/2017/06/01/oldest-house-in-amsterdam/> (accessed 10 January 2023)

⁵ <https://brill.com/view/journals/ijwc/aop/article-10.1163-27723194-bja10012/article-10.1163-27723194-bja10012.xml?language=en> (accessed 10 January 2023)

floors supported by joists held directly by the brick side-walls were found to be lighter than fully-framed timber buildings. The oldest house found to date is 90 Warmoesstraat (Fig. 6) dated 1485, and which now houses the Eagle, Amsterdam's oldest gay club.

David Clark

Carpentry Art in the Diocese of Lund and England: Similarities and Differences in Craft. (Karl-Magnus Melin)

Karl's talk was a fascinating blend of practical, experimental and academic research. It started with a series of videos featuring the reconstruction of the medieval church Södra Råda that was burnt down in 2001. In the forest, 13m long rafters were created by cleaving using only medieval techniques and tools. Transporting them out of the forest without modern machines was striking. Trusses were raised in the order of construction thought to be historically accurate. Karl was at pains to point out how the experience of reconstructing the medieval church challenged preconceived ideas on construction, and how much modifying on-the-go was required, which was likely to have been the case for medieval carpenters also.



Figure 7 Photo ATA. Taken from Traditional Craft Skills as a Source of Historical Knowledge Reconstruction in the Ashes of the Medieval Wooden Church of Södra Råda by Gunnar Almevik & Karl-Magnus Melin⁶

His academic work has seen him visit and examine places in England such as Hadstock (for the door and wooden window frames), Stillingfleet, Kempley, Bristol, and Greensted amongst others. His impressions are that, in Lund, the jointing is nowhere near as advanced and complex in the 12th century as it is in England. Iron nails do much of the work instead, whereas at Kempley dovetail joints and wooden pegs were used.

Hadstock's wooden window frame has jambs tenoned into the lintel. Double-splayed windows with wooden frames are a feature of Lund prior to the 12th century, with 22 found dating between 1058-1080. Some frames appear to be made of reused staves.

⁶ <https://gu-se.academia.edu/KarlMagnusMelin> [accessed January 2023]

Counter rebated doors featured; there is one in Skanör, but the only other examples of which Karl is aware are in England, as at Stillingfleet, Bristol Cathedral and Kempley (dendro-dated to 1114-1144) for example. The medieval Danish example was, in fact, dated by dendrochronology to the 14th century, and is an example of needing caution before using a construction technique uncritically to date construction in a different region.

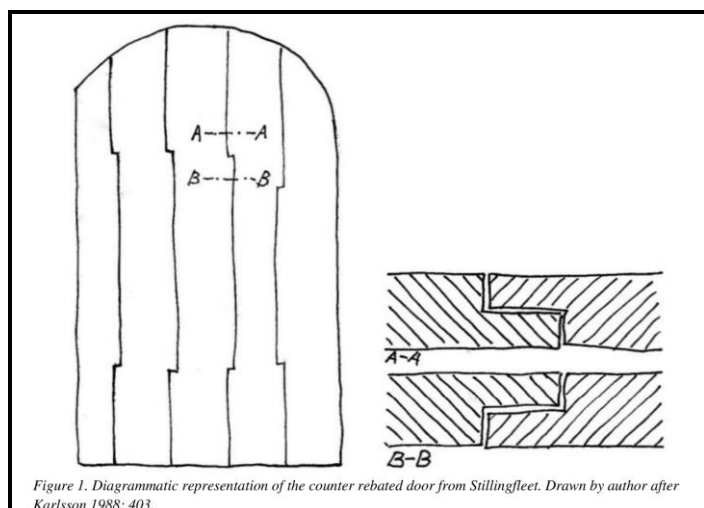


Figure 1. Diagrammatic representation of the counter rebated door from Stillingfleet. Drawn by author after Karlsson 1988: 403.

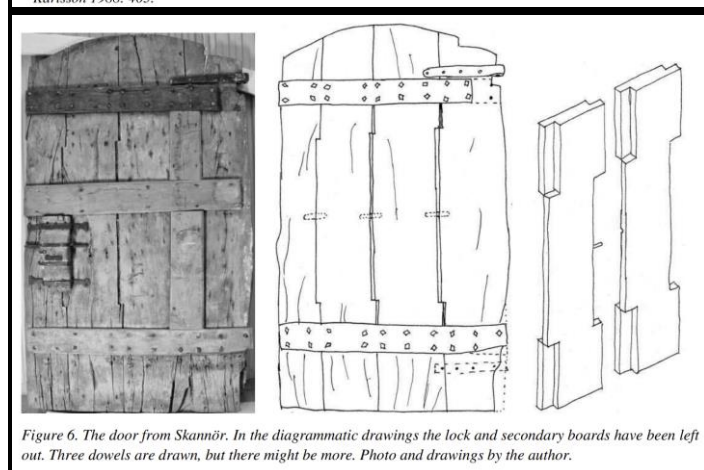


Figure 6. The door from Skanör. In the diagrammatic drawings the lock and secondary boards have been left out. Three dowels are drawn, but there might be more. Photo and drawings by the author.

Figure 8 Taken from *Medieval counter rebated doors. A door from the Diocese of Lund compared with the English examples*, by Karl-Magnus Melin⁷

Other areas of interest included trying to spot and pin down the marks different tools make on wood. A fishbone pattern seemed to emerge when cutting with the fibre using an axe, known as *sprätthuggning*. At Norra Melby, in medieval Denmark, but now in Sweden, much work appeared to have gone into creating a very smooth finish, with little remaining by way of tool marks. Karl thought that the broad axe was more of a continental tool. Karl observed that changes in tools employed can be a response to a change in timber quality, and so it is not always a progression of constant improvement. If the timber quality lessens, the tools used have to respond. At Skanör, Karl observed taper burn marks on the roof timbers, as well as a convex tie beam. Burn marks have been observed in the diocese in approximately 15 churches.

Abigail Lloyd

⁷ <https://gu-se.academia.edu/KarlMagnusMelin> [accessed January 2023]

How Medieval Carpenters Set Out Roofs and Buildings in European Perspective (Paul Reed)

I have always thought that the simple way of doing something will be re-invented over and over again. Paul demonstrated a way of creating a standard unit that could be used throughout the creation of a vernacular building, without complex geometry or angular measurement. The method involved setting out all the timber framing on the framing floor, before any vertical construction commenced. The widest part of the building, likely to be the tie beam between the wall plates, governed the standard unit for that building. With the wall plates laid parallel and horizontal on the framing floor, the tie beam could be laid across, and the position which will become the mortice for lapping over the wall plates marked out. This distance between the outer edges of the wall plate is the dimension from which all other units are derived.

By laying a string across this edge-to-edge dimension, the string folded in half, then half again, then half again, with all the intermediate foldings marked on the tie beam, a regular unit of $1/16^{\text{th}}$ is created, confirmed by setting a pair of callipers to the $1/16^{\text{th}}$ and stepping across the tie beam. These 16 numbered units can be transferred to a rod, which can then be used to set out any other part of the building, so that every timber will relate directly to the tie beam, right down to the dimensions of the joints. This is not the place to outline the fine detail of setting out the rafters and the roof pitch, the collar, the rafter spacing, the sill beam and post and stud positions, as well as the height, and positions of window and doors. Suffice to say that for me it all made logical sense, though I could tell from the atmosphere in the lecture room that not all the audience were convinced. If you would like to follow this further, there is an article in VA 51 (2020, pp.30-49), or more accessibly in 4 short videos <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=124M1lolCm4>

My own extrapolation of the practicality of this method extends to the transfer of the building unit to the masons working on site for foundations or mass walling. This could be achieved with the elegantly simple 13-knot rope, pegged out to make 3-4-5 right-angle triangles, with the knots tied at multiples of the building standard $1/16^{\text{th}}$ unit, ensuring that the frame sat squarely over the foundations when the fully carpentered timbers were brought to site for erection.

Heather Horner

Earth Building as a conscious choice – craftsmanship and tradition shared throughout the Celtic and Irish seas. (Alex Gibbons)

Alex was a SPAB scholar in 2014 and specialises in the ‘clay dabbins’ of the Solway plain. There are less than 300 of these left, and lack of craft skills has affected their survival rate. In particular mud building poses special requirements and specialist knowledge is needed. Thus the most conservative repair is to make pre-dried mud blocks and to use these to fill gaps. Care must also be taken in rendering the result - lime on its own creates unwanted effects such as suction, that has to be managed by using a lime/clay mixture. There is a particularly good organisation in France, *Enerterre*, working in the St-Lo/Coutances area of Normandy where there is the highest concentration of earth buildings in Europe. Their aim is the renovate poorly-insulated houses using traditional methods to ensure they can be sustainable houses for the locals. There is also a social agenda that involves the people, including children, in the building/renovation process. See https://enrd.ec.europa.eu/projects-practice/enerterre-fighting-against-energy-poverty_en

There is a general view from the C18 onwards that mud houses are low-status and not worth preserving, but ‘intangible cultural heritage’ (valuable examples of local cultural identity and the skills needed to maintain them) is now recognised by UNESCO. Mud houses are arguably part of the Celtic cultural tradition, from the north of Scotland to Devon, but more needs to be done to understand its history – were skilled people involved, how does the UK tradition fit with Normandy/Brittany, and so on.

David Clark

[Most examples of ‘intangible cultural heritage’ are performance arts or craft traditions; very few are to do with buildings, but included are the method of building traditional Chinese timber bridges, scribing in French carpentry, traditional Japanese, Chinese and Korean timber framing, and others. It is interesting that none are from the UK. Dry-stone walling is only related to a handful of European countries, (<https://ich.unesco.org/en/RL/art-of-dry-stone-walling-knowledge-and-techniques-01393>) Mud building does not appear on the list. – Ed.]

Magico-religious Marks and Practice in Vernacular Architecture: A French perspective. (Nicolas Vernot)

Most of us are now familiar with the range of deliberately applied post-construction marks to be observed in English building, both to house humans and animals. In France, Nicolas has found a parallel system of people marking buildings. He had some interesting takes on the interpretation of meaning of the various marks, like candle burns and daisy wheels. He observed that burn marks are frequently in accessible places inside buildings, and that as the women were guardians of the home, it was likely most burns had been created by women, though acknowledging that every woman would have her own personal motive. Many of the daisy wheels were in dark places, and he wondered whether this was a way of lighting the dark with symbolic sun symbols.

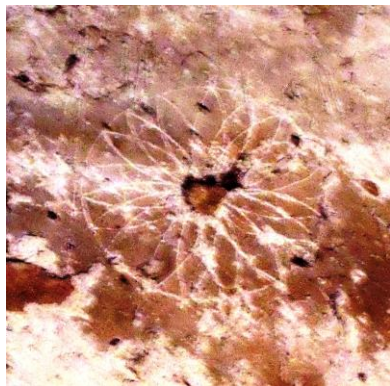


Figure 9 Daisywheel on plastered 19C barn wall, Park Farm, Chatsworth (Heather Horner)

As in English barns and cowhouses, he finds large numbers of daisy wheels scratched into early 19th C plaster, in this case, he postulated that these could be fertility symbols for pregnant cows, or even humans, since the marguerite daisy is also the symbol of St Margaret, patron saint of mothers. (‘marguerite’ is used as the common name for several species of erect daisy-like flowers in the *chrysanthemum* family, including ox-eye daisy.) Elsewhere, I have suggested a similar function

for St Bride, whose patronal day is 1st February, Candlemas, when candles were blessed, with the opportunity to take the blessing back to the home by making a burn mark. I have an open mind on interpretation, every individual would come to their own motivation, though it does seem likely that there were collective waves of the trendy way to either engage with, or alternatively protect oneself from, the uncertain natural world.

Heather Horner

‘Hearth and Home’ a comparison of early integrated houses in the Channel Islands and elsewhere. (Callum Tostevin-Hall)

Early (pre-1250) houses in Guernsey had separate hall (communal space with hearth) and chamber block (private family space). From 1250 integrated houses, with both under one

roof, begin to appear. One of the earliest is Bordeaux Haven (c.1250) a three-cell house, with a three-phase hall fireplace: first, an open hearth, then a low wall fireplace, and finally a raised lintel.

Behind it is a house called Armored, c.1300 with an open hearth. La Moye, on the other hand was a two-cell house with a tourelle to reach a gallery that gave access to the chamber. It never had a hall fireplace. By 1325 at Albecq Farm there was no open hearth, but two end-stacks.

David Clark

More reports from the conference will appear in the next newsletter.

Library of the Business Enterprise Heritage Trust

The Library of the Business Enterprise Heritage Trust, based at Grove Business Park, Wantage, has recently doubled in size, and now holds 50,000 academic books on business history, economic history, and local history. The library is open to visitors by appointment, and members of the Oxford Building Record are most welcome to visit.

The library has special collections on urban and rural history. Local history sources are organised by both towns and counties, with good coverage of Oxford, Berkshire and Buckinghamshire, as well as other areas. It also has special sections on local industries, including agriculture and textiles.

Unlike most research libraries of today, visitors are free to browse the stacks. It is said that ‘the book you *really* need is the one next to the one your *think* you need’ and we can help you find that book.

Established in 2000, the library holds the personal collections of over 20 leading scholars and researchers, as well as books donated by university libraries and research organisations. It continues to expand through regular new acquisitions. There is a reading room with comfortable seating and study space. Three OBR members are Trustees: Mark Casson, Janet Casson and Simon Townley. To make an appointment please contact behtoffice@gmail.com or m.c.casson@reading.ac.uk.

Mark Casson

Forthcoming Events

Abingdon Area Archaeological and Historical Society
7.45pm at Northcourt Centre, Northcourt Road, Abingdon.

16 March Ben Ford (Oxford Archaeology).
Recent Archaeological Discoveries at Frewin Hall, Oxford - a Lost College and so much more

18-19 March This year the Ardington and Lockinge Exhibition will be on Saturday 18th and Sunday 19th March from 2 – 5 pm in the Loyd Lindsay Rooms.



**THE 28TH EXHIBITION FEATURING
THE LOCKINGE ESTATE PAST AND PRESENT**

RE - COLLECTIONS



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Saturday 25 March

Thatching at Cogges Manor Farm

Master Thatcher Alan Jones will be at Cogges during March as part of a National Lottery funded project to restore their Ox Byre. Alan will also be hosting a thatching demonstration morning at Cogges on **Saturday 25th March**. This event will be open to all and will offer an informal way to find out more about thatching (normal admission charges apply). See [Visit Us | Cogges](#)

17 April 2023 The Victoria County History Oxfordshire team will give an illustrated talk in the **Upper Town Hall in Chipping Norton on Monday 17 April at 7pm**

‘Chipping Norton, Over Norton and the environs for Volume XXI’



Tickets are available at £3.00 from
Jan Cliffe - jan@thecliffefamily.co.uk
Pauline Watkins - paulinewatkins58@icloud.com
and from Chipping Norton Museum 2-4pm Mon-Sat. from 1 April

13 May OBR AGM – see agenda below

16 May OLHA spring study day at Rycote

There will be talks on historic gardens and a tour of the Rycote gardens and chapel - full details at [OLHA-Study-Day-flyer-Rycote-16-May-2023.pdf](#).

Saturday 20 May Coleshill

On Saturday 20 May, the National Trust will host a public launch of their Skills Centre at Coleshill. This is the first time the centre – in the former model farm buildings – has been open to the public. You can see open studios, have a tour of the site, and see craft skills exhibitions. Check out the details nearer the time via their website [Coleshill Heritage and Rural Skills Centre | National Trust](#)

For a full list of talks around the county in March, look at the list in the OLHA newsletter ([OLHA e-bulletin, March 2023 \(mailchi.mp\)](#)). OBR are members of OLHA and so you are entitled to receive copies of their newsletter and attend their events. Just sign up at the address given in the newsletter.

Contact details

Contributions for the newsletter – should be sent to secretary@obr.org.uk

Copy dates are 1 March, 1 June, 1 September and 1 January.

Membership – Paul Clark (membership@obr.org.uk)

General – David Clark (secretary@obr.org.uk)

Website: www.obr.org.uk

OXFORDSHIRE BUILDINGS RECORD
TWENTY-THIRD ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

The twenty-third Annual General Meeting of the Oxfordshire Buildings Record will be held (provisionally) on Saturday 13 May 2022 at the Village Hall, Cumnor, starting at 11.30 am. Further details will be circulated before the meeting.

Please let the Secretary know if you have any further items you wish to place on the agenda. Motions should be proposed and seconded.

Agenda

1. Apologies for absence
2. Minutes of the twenty-second AGM on 14 May 2022 (on pp. 11-13 of Oxon Recorder no.90 (Summer 2022) – if you have lost your copy, please visit www.obr.org.uk to download another).
3. Matters arising
4. Treasurer's Report and Accounts for the year 2022
5. Secretary's Report
6. Membership Secretary's Report
7. Election of Officers and Committee for 2023/4
The following Officers need to be elected at the AGM (present incumbent in brackets)
Chairman (Paul Clark),
Secretary (David Clark),
Treasurer (David Hughes).
- The Committee currently consists of the following (present roles in brackets): Kathy Davies, Heather Horner, Felix Lam (Events), Abigail Lloyd, Sally Stradling, Donna Thynne (Archivist), Simon Townley and Nick Wright. All retire annually but are eligible for re-election. Richard Farrant has retired as Newsletter editor and we are also seeking a replacement for Donna as Archivist. If you would like to serve on the Committee, please complete the slip below and return it, if possible before the AGM. to the Secretary, D Clark, 21 Walton Street, Oxford OX1 2HQ.
(secretary@obr.org.uk)
8. Election of Examiner
The OBR accounts examiner, Ian Workman, has been nominated to the post.
9. Any other business

After the AGM, a buffet lunch will be available

After lunch there will be a walk around the local area, starting about 2.00pm and finishing around 4.00pm.

✂.....

Nomination of candidate for election at the Annual General Meeting, 13 May 2023

.....(Name)

is nominated for Committee Membership*/the post* of.....

Proposed by.....Seconded

by.....

I accept nomination and will serve as above if elected.....

Date.....2023

(*delete as appropriate)

(signature of nominee)

Please return to D R Clark, 21 Walton Street, Oxford OX1 2HQ

(secretary@obr.org.uk)