



“That Cottage....Latelie Reeddified and Builded”-

by John Garnish

Just above the Wheatsheaf in Grove Street, Wantage, is a group of what appear to be Victorian terrace cottages, nos 32-36. In 1982, the interior of nos 32 and 34 was completely stripped for refurbishment and the builder, Terry O’Hara, offered me the opportunity to look around. From the inside, it was immediately obvious that behind the Victorian facade was a much older timber structure, which I took the opportunity to survey and photograph. I am very grateful to the occupants of no. 36 who were kind enough to let me examine the inside of their house as well when it proved to be part of the same structure. This article summarises what I found but, for those who may be interested in more detail, a fuller report has been deposited in the Museum.

The results of the survey are summarised in Figure 1 (the ground plan) and Figure 2, which is a somewhat idealised perspective view of the timber framing prior to the Victorian facelift. All three houses (and, indeed, part of no. 38) proved to be late subdivisions of an integrated timber-framed structure, and the real interest lay in trying to identify and date the different phases of building. The basic building technique throughout consisted of timber framing mounted on low brick and chalkstone walls, the framing of the main house being divided up into roughly rectangular panels filled with wattle and horsehair daub. As shown on the groundplan, I was able to identify three major phases of building, not counting the “Victorian” facade and subsequent alterations. Incidentally, the deeds of the cottages apparently go back to the 1830s, so that presumably pinpoints the date of the frontage and division into the present cottages.

The three main sections were distinguishable by the quality of timber used, Phase I being very high quality, Phase 2 rather less so and Phase 3 distinctly poorer. Examination of the interior of no. 36, and inspection of the outside rear of the complex, shows that the timber frame of Phase 1 extends into no. 38, to which I was unable to gain access in the time available. It is clear that Phase 1 was built originally as a three and a half bay timber frame, the two northern bays being divided from the southern one by a narrow chimney bay. The northernmost bay was always two- storey, though it is just possible that the remaining bays were open to the roof when built, as an open hall with smoke bay. More probably, however, the massive chalkstone chimney in the half bay is contemporary with the original building, which would then have been two-storey throughout.

Phase 2 consists of a single additional bay to the south of Phase 1, trapezoidal rather than rectangular to fit the confines of the site. As the original roof structure has been lost, it is distinguishable from Phase 1 only by the slightly lighter timber used and some different carpentry techniques. Phase 3 is very different, however. It is rectangular in plan, consisting of a single bay at right angles to Phase 2, from which it was originally separated by a passageway about four feet wide. The timber is of much poorer quality and it was certainly open to the roof originally, the upper floor clearly having been inserted at a later date. Unlike Phases 1 and 2, the long walls were clad with weatherboarding and show no

sign of ever having been infilled with wattle. It seems probable that its original purpose was as a barn or outbuilding for storage.

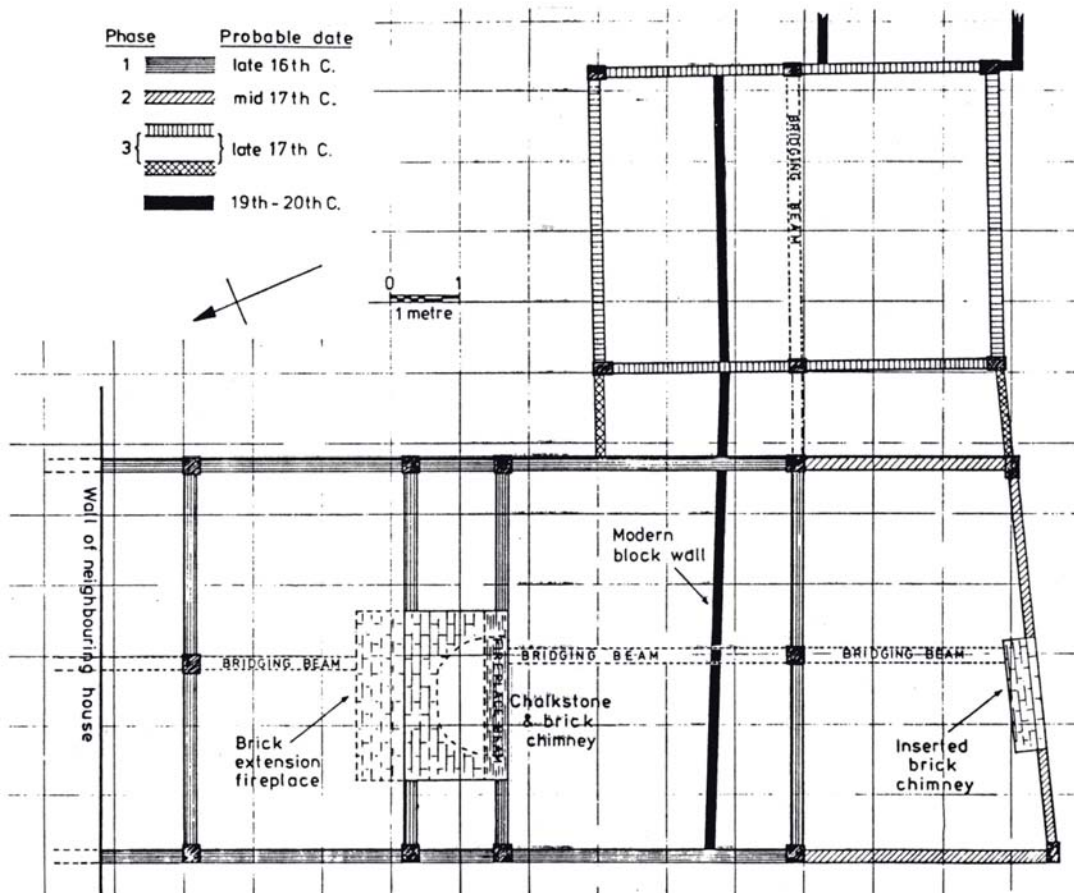


Fig. 1 Ground plan and possible dates of structure.

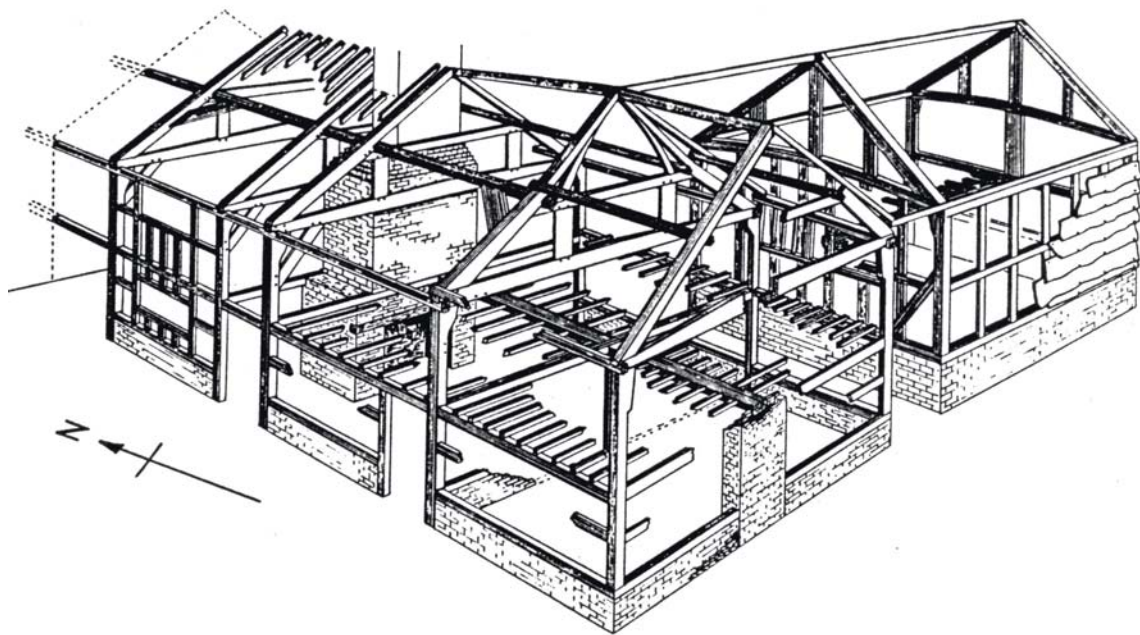


Fig.2 Perspective view (looking north-east from Grove Street)

The roof timbers of the bays of Phase 1 north of the main chimney seem to be original; the roof is of clasped purlin construction with halved common rafters and no ridge timber. The southern bay, and Phases 2 and 3, have all been reroofed, perhaps at the time the passageway between Phases 2 and 3 was covered in to integrate the buildings (Phase 3b). The greater roof height of Phases 2 and 3 has been accommodated by deforming the southern roof truss of Phase 1, the principal rafters having been bent upwards at the weak point where they are thinned around the purlins. A ridge beam has been inserted and the old common rafters re-used - some upside down.

Stripping of the interior of Phase 2 revealed an interesting detail, an original wooden window frame with carefully finished ovalo mouldings remaining in the upper storey and looking out on Phase 3. As the latter is only four feet from the window, we must assume that Phase 3 was not built until some time after Phase 2.

Another interesting feature is the carpentry joint used to attach the inner ends of the upper floor joists to the bridging beams that run along the axis of each bay. In Phases 1 and 2, it is of the type shown in Figure 3a, while Phase 3 uses the type shown in Figure 3b. These are useful in attempting to date the building. The former type, which has been described as “the ultimate joist end joint” (Hewett, 1980), provides maximum mechanical efficiency and is known to have been introduced (in King’s College Chapel, Cambridge) in 1510 and to have persisted to the end of the seventeenth century. It seems unlikely that this could have appeared in Wantage much before 1550, which therefore fixes an earliest date for Phase 1.

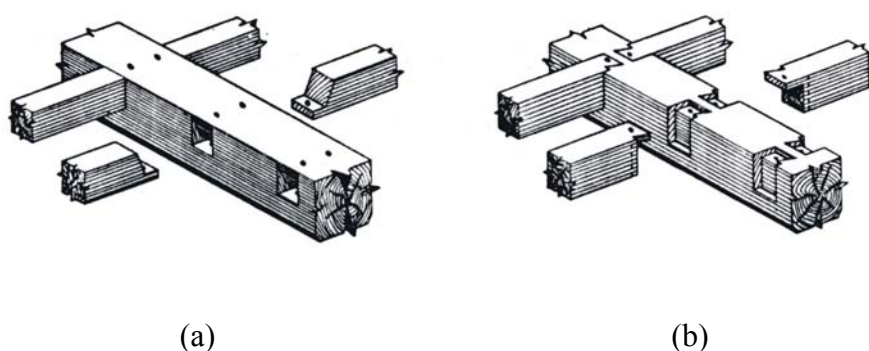


Fig. 3 Joint end joints

The only remaining datable feature of Phase 2 seems to be the window, the style of which points to a date between the late sixteenth to seventeenth century. There are no obvious datable features in the main structure of Phase 3, so we can only assume that (because of the window in Phase 2) it is probably at least 30 years later than Phase 2. The dovetail floor joint in the (inserted) floor is characteristic of later Wantage buildings, however, and can be seen in the Museum building itself. The latter can be dated between 1660 and about 1780.

The only documentary evidence for dating the building is rather speculative, but part of it could be the “Cottage” referred to in Steven Anger’s will (Anger, 1596). If this is indeed the building in question, the reference probably points to the addition of Phase 2. A consistent, but admittedly rough, chronology would then be:

Phase 1	ca.1550
Phase 2	ca.1590
Phase 3a (the “barn”)	ca.1620-1650
Phase 3b (integration of Phases 2 & 3)	ca.1650-1700+

It is even possible that Phase 3b, the reconstruction of the roof and the addition of the nineteenth century facade and bay windows (which removed much of the original framing of the front wall) were all carried out at the same time. From the date of the deeds, this gives a latest date of ca. 1830.

In summary, this would appear to follow a fairly typical sequence, a high quality yeoman house of the Tudor period being extended and altered over the years, sometimes to the point of being unrecognisable. The survey will really have proved its value if it inspires other people to look more closely at what may lie under the unpromising exteriors of many of the apparently nineteenth century buildings in Wantage and so extend our knowledge of how the town looked at the peak of its prosperity.

REFERENCES

Anger, Stephen (1596) - will dated 3.7.1596 (probate 27.9.1597) - Oxford Record Office ORO 83/1/06:

“... my Messuage or tenement garden orchard and backside scituate lying and beinge in wantinge aforesaid in the streat there called Abinton streat otherwise Lowshill ... and also all that Close adioyninge to the est part of the same *and also all that Cottage adioyninge to the Sowthend of the same Close Latelie reeddified and builded*, which Close shoteth at the north end upon the hyewaye...”

Hewett, Cecil (1980) - English Historic Carpentry, Philimore; p.282

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