

**VERNACULAR BUILDINGS RESEARCH
HENLEY ARCHAEOLOGICAL & HISTORICAL GROUP**

Parish/County: Rotherfield Greys, Oxon
Street and House name: 'Thatched Cottage'
Shepherd's Green

Owners: Jayne & Jonathan Lake

Recorded by: Ruth Gibson
Cynthia Robinson
Date: 25.10.2013

Listing grade: Gd II

Known History: In 1844 (Tithe Returns) the house was subdivided into 2 cottages and let to 'Wm. Appleby and Another'. It was in the ownership of the trustees of Mary Atkyns Wright (also see Will of M. Atkyns Wright)

Type and use of building: Dwelling house

Plan form/position: Its plan form is linear, running north-south, parallel to the lane, which crosses Shepherd's Green Common. It sits within a small plot, possibly gained from the common land – similar to the other smallholdings of this Chiltern hamlet, many of which appear to owe their existence to medieval assarting of the woodlands.

It consists of three timber framed bays with a short C19th extension under the northern hip and a modern L-shaped extension at the southern gable, replacing another earlier outshut. Bays I, II & III (see scaled ketch plan p. 5 for identification of bay numbering) are timber framed, but with the front/east elevation now in brick, as are the side extensions.

There is a large brick stack located against the central framing of the north wall of Bay II. It is located within Bay III, set back from both the front and rear walls, creating a lobby entry plan. The front door to this entrance lobby is now accessed via a modern porch; at the back of the stack is the space which originally housed a winder staircase (removed by previous owners, oral evidence). A small window, set into the frame of the rear wall, still testifies to the use of this space – a very traditional and practical one for a winder stair, making use of the stack's masonry.



East front with modern dormers & porch



West rear elevation, square panel framing

Description of front elevation : A single storey building with loft space; the latter has been turned into two attic rooms and landing through the insertion of dormer windows. It is thatched in combed wheat reed (but evidence of the earlier long straw thatching survives within the attic). It is fully hipped at both ends extending over modern additions. (See earlier photograph below, which shows single story side extensions).

There are small, mullioned, leaded light windows. These are modern replacements, but their size and design indicates that some of the window openings may be original and the design of the replacement windows is based on traditional cottage fenestration. There is a modern porch over the front door. All front walls are brick, painted; certainly replacing the earlier timber framing, still in evidence at the rear.

Description of rear elevation: Here the square panel framing is exposed showing the extent of framing of bays I, II and III, although the usually distinctive main posts of the individual trusses are not distinct here; all timbers being of relatively small and varied scantling. The 1 m deep thatch eaves come low down to just above the windows. A small window, (below left) lighting the former stair space at the side of the stack (below central photograph) still exists.



1 m thick thatch at rear/west wall

Internal evidence

Ground Floor: The principal room consists of two framed bays (Bays I & II on plan). The central sill plate and some studs still exist. The plate has been cut on the west side to make an opening, but retains a very distinct groove for the staves of a former wall. However the transverse beam above does not show the equivalent holes or groove for fastening any staves, so may not be original. Other timbers of this cross wall also appear to be second-hand.



Above: Sill beam with groove between Bays I and II

View north from Bay I to Bay II

F.P. in north gable of Bay II, stair lobby on the left

Below: Spine beam with chamfers and stops in Bay II



Bay I The unusual feature of this room is a wall post in the western wall, set into the bottom of the plinth, rather than onto the sill beam. At first sight it appears to be a cruck blade, but there is no other evidence of a cruck building. It must be assumed that this is a second hand timber, used to strengthen the cross wall. Some ceiling beams too appear to be second hand. The stack is a later insertion, of probably late 19th C with a small FP for burning coal.

Bay II This bay appears to retain most of its original framing including the ceiling beams. The spine beam is chamfered with simple run-out stops near the corbel, which supports it above the brick fire place. This is built out of a variety of bricks, those of the east pier are 2” ones. However these ‘Tudor’ bricks do not help with dating, as recycled bricks were often used.

Bay III houses the stack, the lobby entrance hallway on the east side and former stair well on the west side. The timbers in its north gable wall are heavily weathered. There is a narrow doorway in the west wall located above the sill beam, a very unusual location and v. likely inserted once the house had been subdivided into 2 cottages. There are two further doorways in the north wall giving access to the later lean-to now under the hipped roof.



North wall of Bay III



West wall with door



External view, west wall of Bay III

Attic: The roof above Bays I & II is of queen strut truss construction. The purlins are clasped between collars and principal rafters. There are signs that Bay II was constructed first, with all its south facing timbers quite heavily weathered, before Bay I was built protecting the formerly exposed timbers. The wide ledge and plank door is equally weathered and must have once been an external door, but is it in situ? And if it is, was the attic first accessed by external ladder type stairs only? May be the attic was originally only used for storage, without the later dormers it would have been a rather dark space.



Clasped purlins and the three queen struts between tie beams (not visible here) and collars



Queen strut trusses in Bays I (right) and II, (left) where the collar is interrupted by a door frame. Searf joint in unusual location of purlin. . NB heavily weathered timbers of Bay II, south wall. Weathered plank door, hung on iron pintels'. NB old key holes below iron latch.



View of north facing queen strut truss in attic of Bay III; NB no weathering of collar or struts



View into roof space above Bay II showing ridge beam, narrow rafters, long-straw base coat of thatching

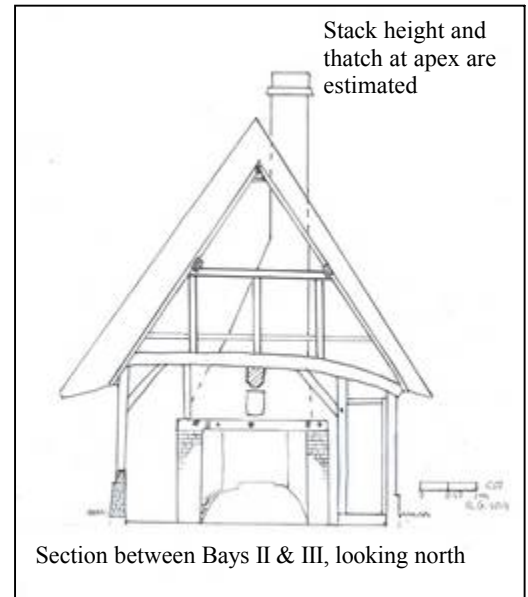
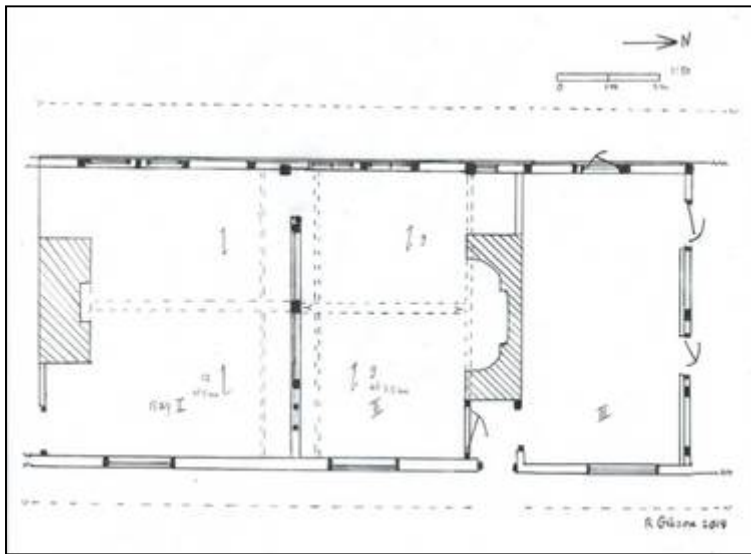


Attic of Bay III, rendered brick stack in the foreground. NB floor is higher than that of Bay II.



Attic of Bay III view of hip, which may be a rebuild or heavily repaired.

The roof space above Bay I was not accessible for inspection. Nothing is known of its construction details.



CONCLUSION

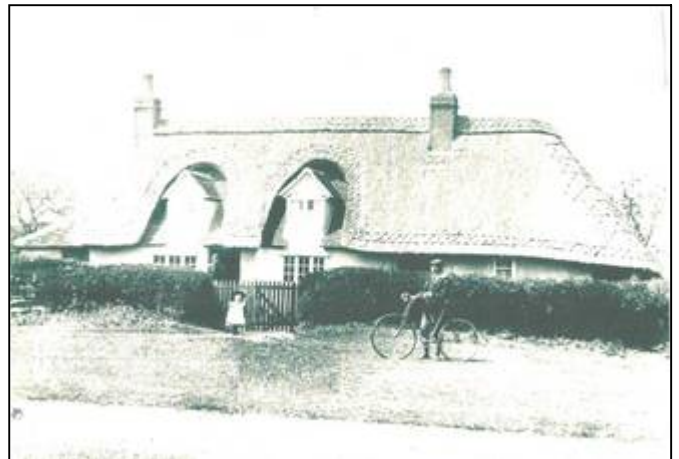
Discussion of possible building date, datable alteration and additions:

The floor plan as well as heavy weathering of former external timber framing (Bay II south wall; Bay III north wall) indicate that this house was built as a two-bay structure, probably with the brick stack being part of the original plan, thus creating a lobby-entry.

A house of this type now had the main entrance into this lobby from which each ground floor room could be accessed separately. This became the norm for houses from the later C16th onwards as open halls with direct entry into them through a draughty cross passage fell out of favour. The entrance into a lobby created privacy, it conserved heat from an internal stack and fire places and made it possible to create a useable attic through insertion of ceilings and the construction of an internal staircase. - All these elements exist here and from the surviving evidence it seems that both Bays II & III, the stack, former winder stairs and ceiling beams of Bay II are original. The ceiling of Bay III is higher and seems to indicate that this room may originally have been open to the rafters or that the ceiling was rebuilt giving more headroom below.

Bay I could have been part of the original build, having formed an internal, unheated room. However, the evidence of the sawn through sill beam between Bays I and II as well as the weathering of the south face of the framing members of Bay II, especially at 1st floor level, suggests that the original house was later extended by the addition of Bay I. Certainly second hand timbers were used for its construction and later repairs obscure the picture.

The rather clumsily executed scarf joints, extending the purlins from Bay II over Bay I are another indicator of a need to carry out in situ carpentry work for an existing structure, rather than preparing the timbers and carpentry work in the framing yard first.



Left: ‘Thatched Cottage’ with outshut extension under a slate roof with tall brick stack (unknown date)

Right: ‘Thatched Cottage’ newly re-thatched with long-straw detailing (circa 1900 ?). The outshut is now covered by the extended thatch hip; the tall brick stack has gone. There is also a small extension to the left hand gable.

A building date of between 1580 and 1620 is suggested for the originally two-bay lobby entry house with integral chimney and storage loft above. However, was this loft accessed originally externally, as the weathered timbers and door suggest, or was the former winder staircase by the stack original to the plan?

A further bay was added on the south side and two dormers inserted to improve the use of the attic rooms for accommodation. The house was divided, extended at both ends and turned into two cottages, probably in the early C19th to accommodate the growing rural population.

Information from the 1844 Tithe Returns, Censuses from 1841 onwards and Parish Records should throw some light on its C19th occupants names and occupations.

Its location on the edge of the Common indicates that it was a small-holder’s dwelling, rather than a farmstead, but it may have had substantial grazing rights within the Chilterns woodland economy.

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