

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

Parish/County: Harpsden , Oxon
Street and House name: Highlands Farmstead

Owners: Associated Holdings

Recorder: Ruth Gibson

Date: 24/11/2011

Known History: The research for the recently published Volume XVI of the Victoria County History has produced several references to the farm. The earliest is 1401 when Hellelane is identified as an individual farmstead among the existing 30 medieval tenants in the Stonor Court Rolls. Mixed farming of barley, wheat, oats and legumes is practised. In a 1660s Stonor estate survey both the neighbouring Cuffals (Cowfields) and Hellons (Highlands) are mentioned. In 1684 Highlands was bought by Robert Hanson, a yeoman, who died in 1711; his will survives (OXO MS Wills 133/4/9).

The size of the farm diminished during the C19th and it was amalgamated with Gillotts Farm. After the First World War Highlands became a poultry farm and in the 1960s its large plateau terrace gravel deposits were industrially excavated. In these gravels a very large number of flint tools of the Palaeolithic were discovered showing that the human history of the site goes back much further than its known medieval occupation (VCH p 321 ref J. Wymer: *Lower Palaeolithic Archaeology in Britain 1968*). The site of the farmstead and the adjoining former gravel pits are now an industrial estate with a variety of uses, including offices and storage.

Location and maps

Shown on the 1797 Davis Map of Oxfordshire as Hellanes Farm in the Parish of Rotherfield Peppard; 1840 Tithe Map as a 180 a. farm, owned by J. Hodges of Bolney, tenant John Sedgwick. It became part of Harpsden Parish in the early C20th .

Location and plan form: From the 1840 Tithe Map we know that there were a large number of outbuildings; four forming a yard to the east of the farmhouse and a further barn and yard on the east side of Highlands Lane (the lane which connects the isolated farmstead with the main Henley – Greys village road).

The remaining buildings are the farm house, a barn and stable, joined together by a building which looks like a shelter or cart shed. These outbuildings are all located to the north/east of the farm house.

Description of the buildings

The farm house

This has been much extended to the south and on the west/rear side in the C 20th .

Nevertheless, one can still recognize the development of the low building, now with modern attic dormers, but originally either with storage attic or built as a hall open to the apex, to which the tall extension, built to house a lobby entrance with newel staircase built against a stack was added on the north side. This stack would have provided a fire place for each of the new rooms and together with the staircase improved the living standard and comfort for the dwellers of the small, timber framed farm house.

The tall extension is built of flints, unknapped and uncoursed, and bricks. The bricks are laid in Flemish bond, which over-fired blue/grey headers used to create an attractive pattern. It has a brick plat band. The ground floor windows are cross shaped, the upper ones have two side hung casements. The entrance door opens to a small lobby from which both the parlour and earlier parts of the house are reached. The latter is at a lower level and accessed by stepping down from the lobby. Opposite the front door is a narrow newel staircase, built against the side wall of the

stack (not visible, but probably still extant behind the plaster as its chimney still remains on the roof ridge – see right hand photograph below.)



East front of C18th brick work of tall, right hand building; a ‘Parlour Wing’ ? The central building has later brick walls encasing a two-bay timber framed structure. The dormers are modern, as are the roofs.



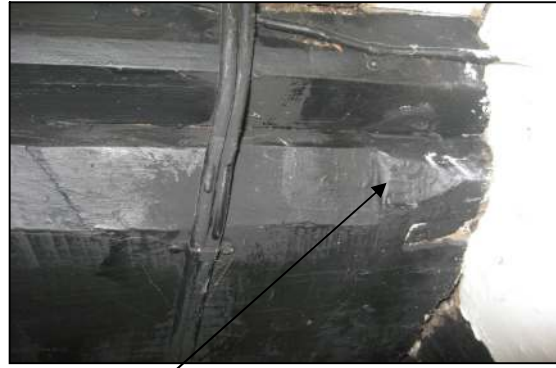
Left: Newel staircase seen from the attic; Centre: ceiling beams and coving for upper chamber fire place; Right: spine beam and ceiling joists. All above photographs are of the ‘new parlour wing’.

Below: the interior of the lower, left hand timber framed building (encased in brick)



View of the exposed timbers of the 1 ½ storey building. This is the 1st G.F. room on the left, lower than the later entrance lobby. This also confirms their different building dates.

Rubble stone plinth and sole plate in the south wall. West & north walls, here a beam was cut through to allow for the later doorway from the entrance lobby in the ‘parlour wing’.



Above the ceiling timbers of the 2nd timber framed g.f. room. The wide spine beam has chamfered edges with simple run out stops. Additional trimmers have been added to each side of the main beam to support the square laid joists, some of which have moved exposing parts of their tenons. - Adze marks are visible on the soffit (underside) of the beam, showing how it was converted from the tree.



Left: The rear wall with posts rising from the much modernized plinth, but remnants of an earlier plinth are probably still in situ underneath.

Right: Plinth, sole plate and post detail in the cross wall between the two rooms.



The farm buildings

The 1840 Tithe Map shows a group of four outbuildings forming the yard; two of them have gone but on the north side of the farm yard there is the footprint of a large building with porch and lean-to structures as well as a small rectangular building. These two seem to be the existing barn and stable. They have since been linked by a building, which may have been an open fronted shelter shed. All have been converted to office or light industrial uses.



Barn and stable/cowshed group seen from the east gable of the stable, looking west towards the barn. The wide plank door in the gable suggests that the adjoining interior space once held the bull pen, (a very similar bldg. exists at neighbouring Cowfields Farm) Note louvered ventilation turrets on the roof.



South front of three-bay timber framed and weather boarded barn with porch and half hipped, tiled roof. The lean-to, just visible behind the modern shed, appears to be a later addition or a re-built animal shelter shed, often found attached to the exterior of barn walls on Chiltern farmsteads.



Small link building between barn and stable. The survival of several staddle stones within the later concrete dwarf wall just below the inserted weather boarding shows that this building was open fronted; the staddle stones are there to support posts, which in turn support the wall plate, allowing open animal access to the shelter from the farmyard.

Interior : The barn interior is now ‘open plan’, but it retains the bay divisions through its main wall posts. The south wall posts are free standing, on plinths with braces rising at the top, just below the inserted ceiling. They retain their structural integrity and continue to support the roof structure. The north wall posts are hidden between the external weather boarding and internal insulation.

The roof is only accessible from the adjoining link building, which was not accessible during the site visit. Judging from the exterior it is possible that the original, half hipped roof structure survives, its shape indicating an earlier thatched covering.

Conclusion

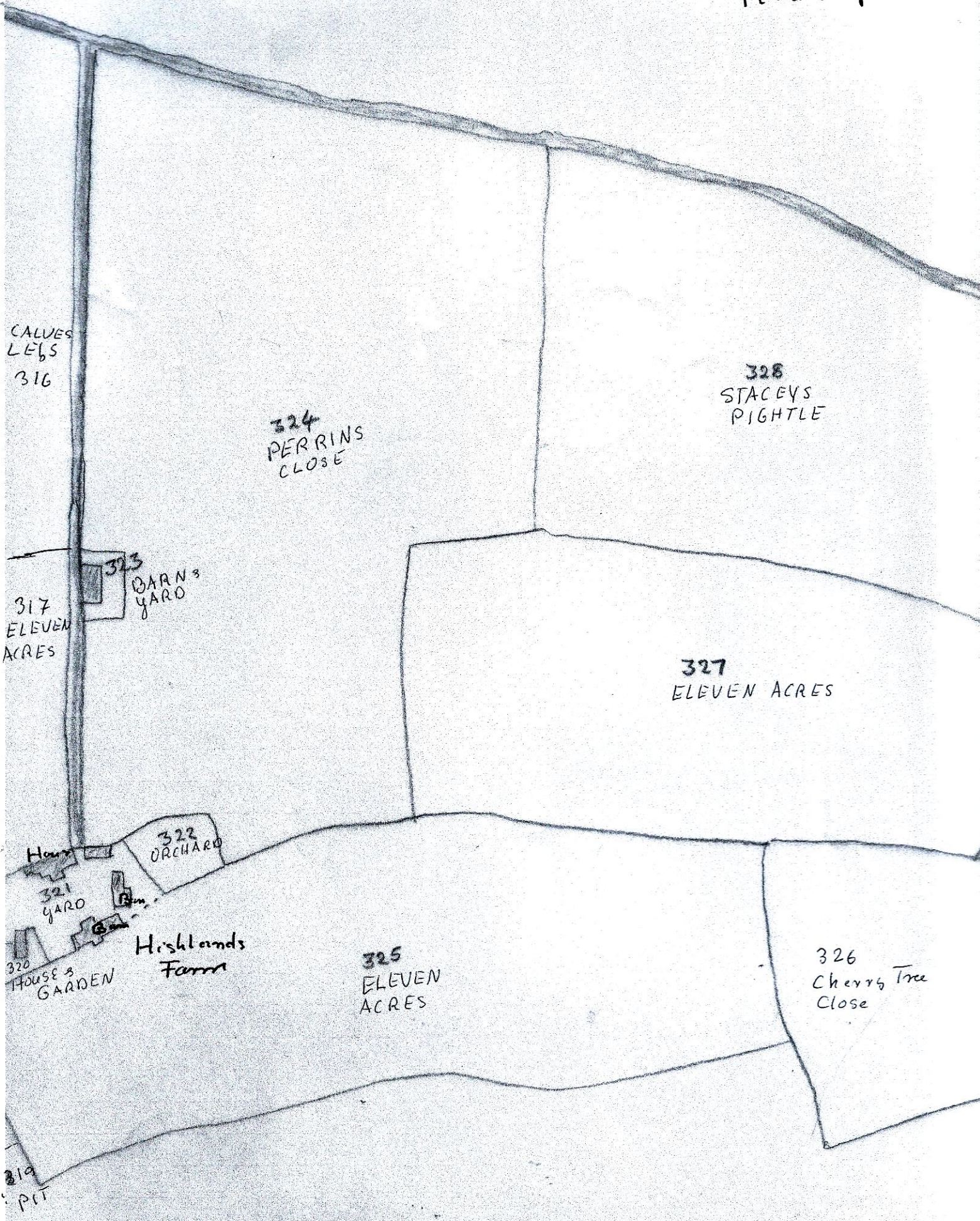
The 1840 Tithe map and Tithe Returns tell us that this was a farm of good size and with a considerable arable acreage, with a number of outbuildings shown which are more than double of what there is today.

Documents provide evidence of its existence by 1401. What remains of the timber framed, two bay building shows a structure which could date from that period. It may have started life as an open hall with a later ceiling of possibly mid/late C16th date or it may have been built as the cross wing to a vanished hall. The addition of a brick & flint built ‘parlour block’, complete with large brick stack, two fire places and newel stair and large cross windows, meant a considerable improvement in living standards and would fit into the mid-late C17th.

Unfortunately the modern roof structures and dearth of original features such as doors and fire places makes closer dating very difficult without the help of further work of more detailed recording and through dendro dating the original timbers.

Nevertheless the group of farm house and surviving farm buildings represent an important survival of a medieval farmstead against all the odds of large-scale C 20th development, in this hidden corner of the Chilterns AONB; i.e. it was very likely overlooked during the rushed ‘Accelerated Listing’ of the 1980s like many other farmsteads in the Binfield Hundreds.

Protherfield Reversion
Title Map 1840





Hambleden's village centre complete with shop, central tree and village pump. Compare and Contrast!

Dear Phil

Crest Nicholson chose to hold a single consultation on their final plans for the 170 houses at Highlands Farm last Wednesday between 2 and 8 p.m. rather than in the town on a weekend day when many more people could have seen it. When staff were asked about this it seemed to us that this was just part of a ticking boxes exercise which needed to be done.

There are serious errors in the display, i.e. ignoring the Scheduled Ancient Monument (the edge of the extensive and highly significant Palaeolithic flint tool deposits site, found during the 1950/60s gravel extractions). The SSSI is on the plan but in the wrong location. Then there is a photograph of a road, saying Gillott's Lane, complete with central white line. When challenged staff admitted that this was wrong, there will just be passing bays, as now. - It seemed a rather sloppy presentation.

The layout is that of a housing estate, which could be anywhere, not that of a place reflecting local distinctiveness; it lacks strong frontages along the primary routes, where a community of neighbours would come together and feel secure through mutual surveillance that occurs naturally in a close-knit village. - On the plan are the usual estate houses, set back behind small front gardens, often linked garages, or large blocks, just like the many suburban housing estates built since the 1960s. The brick and flint house walls are an easy concession to convey a vernacular feel, but that is all it is, just skin deep without meaning.

Marked on the plan is a 'Village Green', very commendable, but set to one side, not central to the village, and consisting of two football pitches. What happens to those who like to play hockey, rugby, cricket, tennis etc. or just run around for the fun of it? Or to families who like to picnic, have village fetes and do all the kind of communal things village greens are traditionally used for?

This brings me to our central concern. 'Highlands Farmstead' has been documented from the early C15th. A timber framed two-bay part of the late C15th to mid C16th farmhouse survives, now behind a brick front, re-roofed and grossly extended on its south side. Adjoining on the north is a brick & flint parlour wing of early to mid C17th date; both together giving a good idea of a prosperous yeoman's home, as does the close-by large timber framed barn. These, together with later stables still form about a third of the historic farmyard. Freed of its C20th additions and porta cabins/sheds

etc this farmyard could and should once again be the central space, where people naturally congregate. Earlier maps show where other outbuildings once stood and where new 'community buildings' might be erected. Future occupants of Highlands may be pleased to find a Time Line connecting them through this medieval farmstead back to early human occupation of the Neolithic, Mesolithic and Palaeolithic times of early inhabitants here. Not many villages can boast such an ancestry; why discard this centuries old connection so carelessly? Once gone it can never be put back.

The application plan totally removes the historic farmyard and all its buildings and replaces it with a wide, three storey block of flats. It is called a **KEY BUILDING** at the end of the access road at a 'possible central square and a **feature tree** similar to the entrance to Hambleden'. The word '**HAM BLEDENESQUE**' is used, apparently newly coined for this occasion? Nobody who has ever been to lovely Hambleden can even think of making such a comparison; there the central open space of the village is not only surrounded by listed buildings, but most of these play an essential part in the life of the villagers. Apart from the always welcoming church used for many social and cultural events, there is the shop/post office/café, the village hall, a car repairs shop, the Pub, entrance gate to the village allotments (always a good place to meet; why not have one at Highlands?) and a further meeting hall.

The massive three-storey Crest Nicholson building, see below, has no place in the Chiltern AONB, neither at Highlands nor anywhere else in the Chiltern. One tree in front of it will not make an iota of difference.

Yours sincerely

Pam Syrett, Viv Greenwood, Ruth Gibson (01491 572271)

Henley Archaeological & Historical Group

N.B. The Chiltern Conservation Board reminds us in its Spring Newsletter: *The AONB designation is given to some of the finest landscapes in the UK and marks out the Chiltern Hills as a priceless national treasure.*



Indicative design of flats



Existing Barn Group (behind modern sheds) protecting the north side of the farmyard. These barns are to be demolished under the proposed scheme and replaced with the above block of flats.



Highlands Farm House, b & f. parlour extension to timber framed house behind; with modern extension on the right. To be demolished to make way for modern 5-bedroom house and garage.