

Cromwell House, 100 High Street, Wheatley

In a deed from the time of William and Mary (1689-1702) there is reference that the owners of Friday Cottage (Friday Lane) also owned other properties nearby including Cromwell House but this cannot be verified.

There are a number of old farmhouses in Wheatley from the 1600s. Rectory House (originally Rectory Farm) was been dated by dendrochronology to 1630. Ambrose Farm and the smaller farmhouse in Farm Close Lane are also of this era but have not been dated so precisely. Farming in the country was very profitable until 1650 due to the success of our wool exports into Europe, but then the English product fell out of favour abroad. The quality of wool had deteriorated due to sheep grazing being extended onto better quality pastures which did not however produce the previous quality of wool. The finances of English wool farming thus fell into decline. It is logical, therefore, that any farmhouse from the 1600s might have been built in the more prosperous first half of this century. This may be relevant to Friday Cottage and Cromwell House, as these also may have been farmhouses. For, in the 1600s and 1700s for security reasons, these were located within the village built-up area and, thus, away from the land which they farmed. There is an example of such a 17th century farmhouse in Farm Close Lane.

On the High Street there are a number of surviving older properties with good quality dressed stonework. Those built during the 1500s include the Manor House, the King & Queen public house, and The George. Houses almost certainly in existence here in the second half of the 1500s include 82 High Street. The Cromwell House stonework at the front is superior to some of these older buildings. Much of the rest of the current High Street is from a later period from 1760 onwards. This was probably due to a massive downturn in the agricultural economy from 1650 for nearly a century with, as a consequence, relatively little building work taking place in the village in that period.

Theory of the levels of High Street east up to Crown Square

One of the very puzzling aspects of Cromwell House, situated on the south side of the High Street, is its original street level, which can be seen behind the railings. This is also evident with the level of 109 High Street, opposite, although it is not so obvious or pronounced. To the west of 109, High Street, particularly houses 99 to 105 were probably built or rebuilt in the period from 1760 to the early 1800s on top of a presumed limestone outcrop rather than excavating into it, resulting in the access to these being up steps. At 109, however, the limestone outcrop is presumed to have been lower. When the stream through the village was culverted (including the section from the western end of the present parade of shops down to Crown Square along which the stream had not previously run), it is almost certain that the levels of this end of the High Street and Crown Square were raised. On the far side of Friday Lane numbers 113 and 115 High Street, (The Chequers Inn until the early 1920s) are also below the level of Crown Square, suggesting that the level of this too has been raised, presumably to alleviate flooding, not always with success!

The following explanation is suggested. The far east end of the High Street was originally lower as evidenced by the two surviving houses from 1750 or earlier, Cromwell House at 100 High Street and 109, High Street. The older part of Cromwell House was built perhaps before 1700, when the carriageway was some 70cm (2' 3") lower based on the 'ground' level below the current roadway. 109 High Street (opposite) probably dated slightly later from perhaps 1750 when it was some 37.5 cm (1' 3") lower than its current level – based on the measured step-down into that house. But to this the unmeasured gradient difference in street level between the north and south sides of the road has to be added. Thus the 37.5 cm step-down into 109 High Street may be similar to the 70cm at Cromwell House.

The level of the original front part of 107 High Street indicates that it was probably built after 1750 at the current street level with a later rear extension built into the bedrock behind the house. Houses to the west of 107 High Street appear also to have been built for ease above the street level to avoid excavating the bedrock, which also explains why houses 99-105 have steps up to their front doors. West of 99 High Street, the level of the bedrock must have been lower as there is even a basement in Lynton House, 83 High Street, albeit the cellar floor is only some 1.4 metres below the current road level. This is the only, so far known, property along this part of the High Street with a basement, there being none surprisingly in the old White Hart Inn – now Cinnamon.

Consideration of the stream behind the houses south of the High Street has raised another issue. As the land today rises to the south from Cromwell House, the level of this stream, shown on the 1813 enclosure award map would appear to have been substantially above the ground floor level of Cromwell House, making it extremely prone to flooding. This is most unlikely. The land to the immediate north of Farm Close Lane is substantially lower than this lane, a right of way for several centuries. It is speculated that, as all of Wheatley is located on the belt of limestone, this may have been quarried between the then-lower level of the stream and Farm Close Lane. After the stream was re-routed, this back land to the High Street houses was subsequently raised to current levels, perhaps using spoil from the railway works in the 1860s. Examination of the foul drainage plans suggests that the routing of this has largely followed or even used, the old route of the stream. It is unlikely, as has been suggested, that this old stream route has been left still available, albeit now in a culvert, to supplement the flows now in a culvert under High Street.

Cromwell House analysis

Cromwell House consists of two parts, the substantial part to the west (right in this picture) and a more modern part to the east, with the division very evident, as shown by the joint in the stonework left of the house name in Figure 1.

Figure 1



Some of the stonework is fine dressed, up to or beyond the standard of the other houses in the High Street, indicative of a wealthy builder/owner. The rather ragged stonework at the top; the evidence of an earlier steeper roof line (see the very different slope in the left corner of Figure 2) and brick ‘make-up’ at the rear (Figure 3) confirm that this house was originally thatched.

Figure 2



Figure 3



There was an earlier separate front door, although the presumed timber lintel has been removed, with the detail of the blocked-up opening and its position shown in Figure 4, this being suggestive that the house was originally two one-up one-down dwellings.¹

Figure 4



There are two fireplace beams in the house. The one at the west end is the more interesting as it appears to be older and has tell-tale marks on it. The timber here has split over the years as is normal for a timber of some age. This beam has a very large number of lozenge marks, associated with the warding-off of evil spirits in the early to mid-17th century. The two on the left in Figure 5 are very similar to ones in 6 Farm Close Lane, almost certainly a mid to late 17th century farmhouse. Most of the other marks are less precisely formed and may have been a later imitation detail. There is a chamfer on the front underside which does not extend to the full width of the hearth which suggests that this may have been re-cycled from an earlier use elsewhere.

Figure 5



¹ Tony Pratt confirms this to be the case, see footnote 3.

Eastern part of the house

The east part of the house is a much newer addition as shown by the roof structure in Figure 6. Assuming that this has not been replaced, it has a presumed age of early 19th century. This part shows no evidence at the roof line of thatch, suggesting that the roof on the earlier building was converted from thatch to tiles at the same time as this extension was built.

Figure 6



The extension is not symmetrical being 3.85 metres at the front, 4.35 metres at the back and 4.05 metres at the (side) entry point.

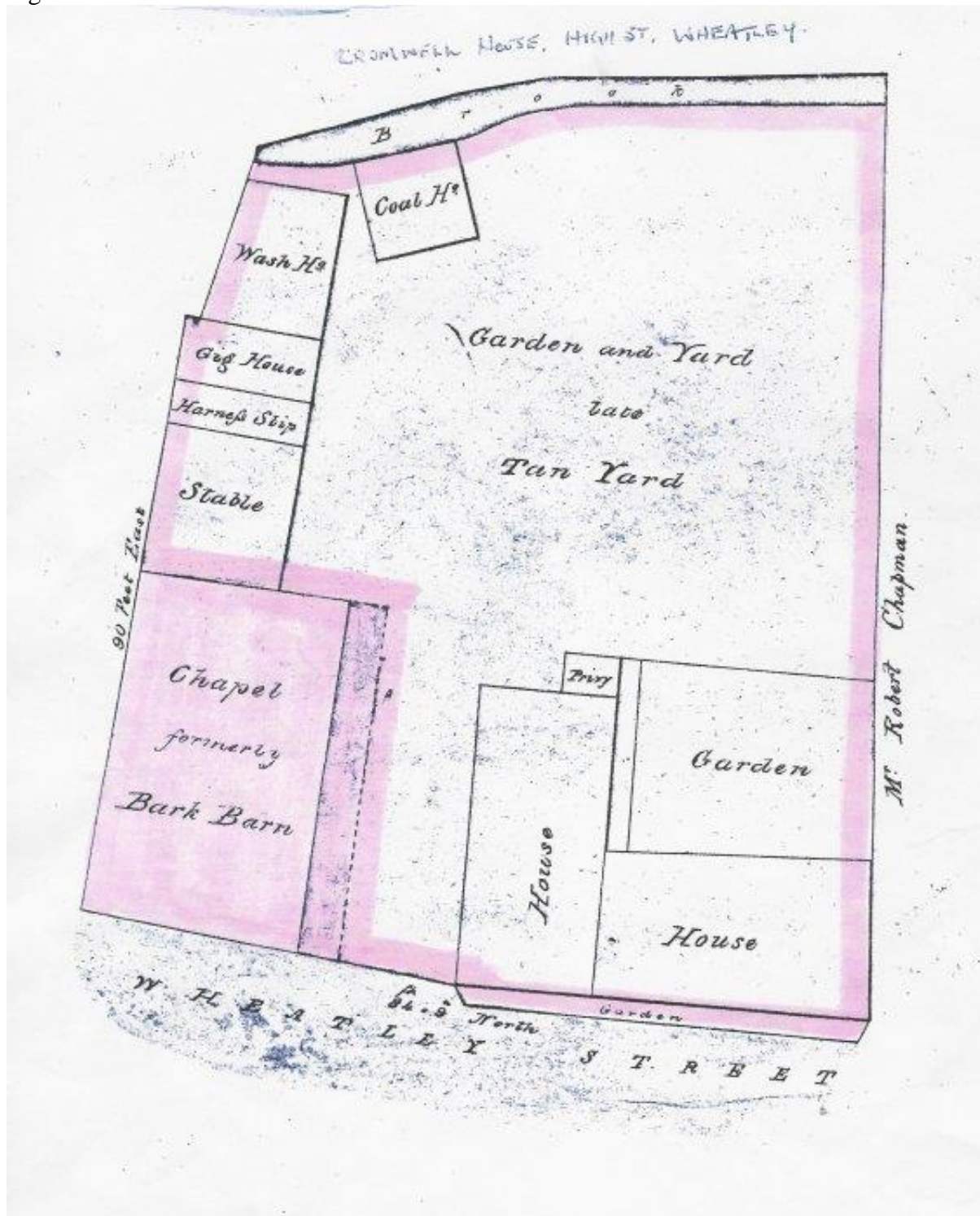
On the upper floor there is a small cupboard with a painted and panelled door said to have come from Holton Park where Cromwell's daughter was married, hence the name of the house. The joints of the frame of this paneling are fixed with two pegs in the top and bottom of the rail, which was the practice in the 17th century, after which a single peg was used.² The hinges are plain 'H' type which dates them to the second half of the same century. Inside the cupboard is a shelf with four almost circular cut-outs, perhaps used to hold muskets!³ Photographs of these details are not shown as is the policy for internal residential detail other than roof structures and beam details not considered a security risk.

² L. Hall, *Period House Fixtures and Fittings: 1300-1900*, (2019, Newbury, 2005), p. 139.

³ This and other suggestions from Tony Pratt (contact details held), occupier until 1980.

The house was sold by a fellmonger in c. 1850 for private housing, with the plan in Figure 7 being used. It is not the purpose of this paper to consider the various outbuildings facing onto Crown Square. It is interesting that the area behind the railings is called 'garden', consistent with theory that the street level was the 70 cm lower at this time. Note that the brook is shown at the back of the site.

Figure 7



The upper part is alleged to have been used as a scarlet fever isolation hospital. Comments in the parish register reveal that there was scarlet fever in the village in 1863, and smallpox in 1865. The upper floor is also said to have been used in the tanning business for the drying of skins, and later to have been used by a tailor. The nails in Figure 8 might have something to do with the hanging of hides (when it was the premises of a fellmonger) or a tailor's business?

Figure 8



Other nails, about 7cm (2.75") long and shown in Figure 9, found in the house are frost nails for securing horseshoes onto hooves in icy conditions, this trade then being carried out by the blacksmith who had his business here in the early 1900s.

Figure 9



Conclusion

These findings taken together (including deed evidence, quality of stone work and lower street level) give a real possibility that the older part of Cromwell House was built in the 1600s.

Wheatley Village Archive, August 2021