

OXFORDSHIRE BUILDINGS RECORD REPORT OBR.392

**Ambrose Farm
55 Crown Road
Wheatley
OX33 1UL**



Figure 1 Ambrose Farm, south elevation

Introduction

The Oxfordshire Buildings Record are grateful to the owner, Peter Knapp for allowing us access to his house for the purposes of compiling this report as a contribution to the better understanding of Oxfordshire's buildings. David Clark was able to spend about three hours there on 11 July 2019, with Michael Heaton and two members of the Wheatley Village Archive.

The objectives of the survey were to understand the dates and phases of the building.

We made a visual inspection of the exterior and such internal spaces as were accessible. Photographs were taken of significant features. Unless indicated otherwise, text and images were created by members of the recording team. A limited number of historical sources were consulted. A copy of the 2nd edition (1899 survey) Ordnance Survey map at 1:2500 annotated for the 1910 District Valuation was obtained from the Oxfordshire History Centre.

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Location (NGR SP 60069 05519)

Ambrose Farm was plot 337 on the 1910 District Valuation map (Fig.2). It lies on the north side of Crown Road, an early main road through the village. At the time of the

DV map, there were agricultural buildings between the house and the road. Some parts of these may survive in the street wall (Fig.3).



Figure 2 Extract from 1910 DV map (Reproduced by courtesy of the Oxford County Council – the Oxfordshire History Centre)¹

Description

Ambrose Farm consists of a rectangular range running east-west, with two gabled wings to the rear (north) and a modern two-storey extension in the angle between the earlier elements (Fig.4). The main building material is limestone rubble, uncoursed and whitewashed. There are dressed quoins to the north-east corner of the front range. The roof covering is plain red tile.



Figure 3 Street elevation



Figure 4 North elevation

A number of features of the structure were noted:

¹ DV-IX-51_Oxfordshire_XL-2

- a. Some of the walls have a distinct ‘batter’ – that is, they taper towards the top. This can be seen in the rear wall of the front range (Fig.5) and in the wall of the westernmost rear wing (Fig.6).



Figure 5 Front range rear wall



Figure 6 North wing wall at doorway

- b. The rear wall of the front range is blank in the far eastern bay (left in Fig.4)
- c. There is evidence of a relieving arch in the stonework above the ground floor westernmost window (right in Fig.4).
- d. There is a round stone feature at ground level at the south-east corner.
- e. The north-western corner of the wing is chamfered.

We return to these below.

There are two wide single-storey extensions to the south façade (Fig.1), effectively bay windows, with metal window-frames. The eastern is hipped with a tile covering; the western has a flat roof that extends over the gap between, forming a porch over the front door. Also to this façade is a lateral stone chimneystack, extended upwards above eaves height in brick. It has one chimneypot. There are four large windows at first floor level in the south elevation. All have metal frames, but that to the west is a cross-window with leaded lights and a late 17th-century style of turnbuckle catch (Fig.7).² The others are early 20th-century casements.



Figure 7 Turnbuckle catch at first floor window



Figure 8 West window of rear wing

There is another early window in the west wall of the rear wing (Fig.8). This has three lights, leaded, with the central a hinged casement. There are pintles for shutters to

² Hall (2005) p.90 Fig.3.56

either side. The catch (Fig.9) is of a late 17th-century design and the twisted hook stay (Fig.10) is of the same period.³



Figure 9 Turnbuckle catch



Figure 10 Twisted hook stay

The eastern rear wing has two square-headed casement to the ground floor and a first floor window with a brick segmental head (Fig.4). This window has a casement with a spring catch (Fig.11) – a type which, according to Hall, became very popular in the south-east in the 18th-century – also the likely period of the segmental head.⁴



Figure 11 Spring catch to rear window

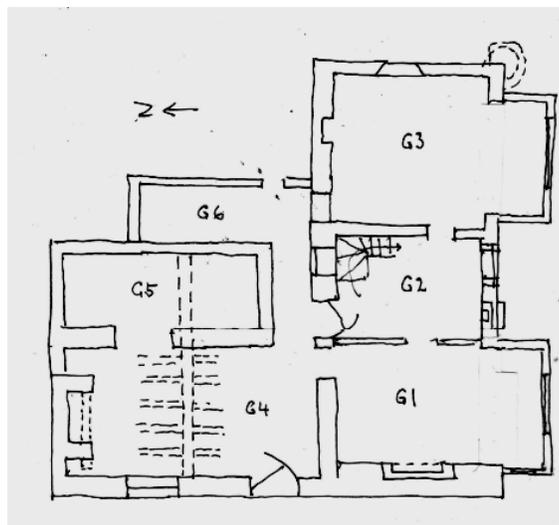


Figure 12 Ground floor plan (not to scale)

At the apex of the western gable is a brick chimneystack in two parts, though now of similar brickwork with a flat ‘table-top’ cap and a total of three flues (Fig.3).⁵ To the rear is a further brick stack with one flue at the gable of the western wing, and another in modern brickwork with two flues within the lateral wall at the east of the front range (Fig.4).

The ground floor plan is sketched at Fig.12. G1 has been considerably remodelled in the 20th century, but its main feature is the stone fire surround at the west gable (Fig.13). This has a Tudor-style four-centred arch with recessed spandrels and moulded jambs with chamfers that stop well above floor level. These high stops are

³ Hall (2005) p.91 Fig.3.60

⁴ Hall (2005) p. 89 Fig. 3.54

⁵ Fletcher (1968) p.69, where they are identified as typical of Wiltshire and Dorset

often associated with 16th century fireplaces, but Hall illustrates a mid-17th-century example from Wiltshire.⁶



Figure 13 Fire surround in G1



Figure 14 G4 beam entering G5 through wall

The fireplace of the southern lateral stack can be seen in G2. It has a brick head and is sufficiently narrow to have held a Victorian coal-burning grate. A modern staircase leads from G2 to the first floor. It is lit from the north by the internal window shown in Fig.5.

There are no early features in G3. In G4 and G5, however, a heavy beam (Fig.14) spans both spaces and is cantilevered over a thick stone wall between them as shown in Figs.12 and 14. Where it enters G4, two sections are joined by a scarf joint that has a single peg for a secret bridle, and the squinted abutment ensues a degree of stability. The joists in G4 are lodged over this beam, rather than being tenoned into it, but there are two pegs visible in the soffit, one of which has a section of tenon still adhering (Fig.15).



Figure 15 Beam with residual tenon and peg



Figure 16 Fireplace in G4

The other major feature of G4 is a wide fireplace (Fig.16) spanned by a deep bressumer that extends beyond the present western jamb and has been rather crudely cut back there. The only marking visible on the bressumer is what appears to be a level mark (Fig.17) – easily mistaken in this context for an apotropaic symbol.⁷

⁶ Hall (2005) p.174 (Fig.7.15)

⁷ Level marks are lightly scored cross-like marks, which were used to obtain two parallel flat faces when hewing a log. (See, D W H Miles and Henry Russell, 'Plumb and Level Marks' in *Vernacular Architecture* 26 (1995) pp.33-38.)



Figure 17 Level mark on G4 fireplace bressumer



Figure 18 Former window in F1

A significant feature in G4 is a date-stone inscribed, 'Robert Day 1776' (Fig.19). This is set into the wall between G4 and G1.

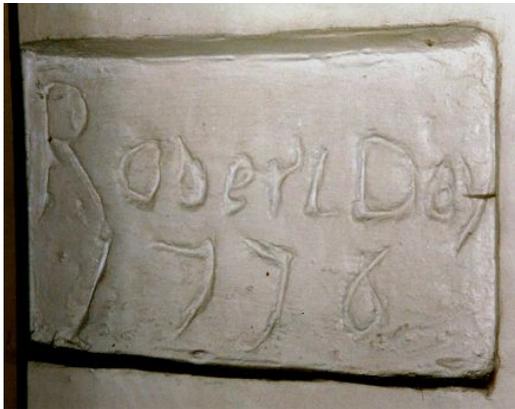


Figure 19 Robert Day datestone

Apart from the other end of the beam shown in Fig.14, there are no other features of note in G5: G6 is within the flat-roofed modern extension visible in Fig.4.

The first floor spaces are indicated as F1-F6, the rooms above G1-G6 respectively. The window in F1 has already been noted (Fig.7). At the opposite (north) wall is a blocked window (Fig.18). The fireplace in F1 is blocked in. [is this right?]



Figure 20 F4 doorway



Figure 21 Suffolk latch



Figure 22 Strap hinge

One of the main features of interest at first floor level is the door into F4 (Fig.20). The moulded architrave is within F4, yet the door opens out into a corridor and the lock is on the 'outer' side – with an iron staple in the frame to hold the bolt. There is also an

iron latch with a Suffolk handle (Fig.21) nailed to the door, but on the 'inside' – ie within F4. The only fitting that can be closed from within F4 is a modern bolt latch. The door itself is formed of three vertical planks, held together by four battens at the back. It has two strap hinges (Fig.22) supported by pintles fixed to the frame. The ends of these hinges wrap round the door at the pintles are on the 'outside'. Almost everything about this door speaks of it being an entry from F4 into a private room in the position of F5. But one of the oddities is that - whether it opens to F4 or to F5 – it does so in the 'wrong' way, as the normal way a door is hung in England is on the other jamb, so that the door opens into the room, not against the wall. Whatever the reasons for this, it should be noted that the hinges and latches are all nailed in place, and so likely to be in situ.

Roof structures

Likely to be the least altered part of a building, the roof structure sometimes holds the key to the discrepancies noted at the lower levels. We turn now to this issue.



Figure 23 Roof above G2 and G3 looking east



Figure 24 South roof slope of G2/G3 roof

Fig.23 shows the roof above G2 and G3, looking east towards the stone gable wall. There are two tiers of purlins supporting common rafters, though in the foreground, a plank collar with notches near each end has been nailed across one pair of rafters to form a makeshift truss, intended to clasp the purlins to the rafters, though these have now parted company. Also at the apex of this 'truss' is a pair of saddles supporting a plank ridge that runs along the length of this part of the roof. Fig.24 shows part of the upper purlin to the south, with augured stave mortices at regular intervals along its length. These make no sense in its present context, and adds to the evidence that this part of the roof has been rebuilt at some stage.

Above the partition wall between G1 and G2 is a fully carpentered roof truss (Fig.25) This is an A-frame, with assembly marks at most of the joints, such as that between the collar and the principal rafter at the north (Fig.26).



Figure 25 Truss above G1/G2 partition



Figure 26 Assembly mark on collar

The truss is 'closed' by means of a framework of studs (Figs.25 and 27) which are tenoned into the collar and tie-beam below. Each stud has a chiselled assembly mark (Figs.28 and 29) and these run in order from north to south. To this framework of studs are nailed riven oak laths which support the plaster wall-covering of the space behind to the west. There are also some laths nailed to the eastern face of the truss (Figs.25 and 27), but this work was never completed, as there is no sign of plasterwork on this side of the truss.



Figure 27 Lower section of Fig.25 partition



Figure 28 Assembly mark on stud 5

The west face of this plasterwork is shown in Fig. 30. It has a pattern of diagonal scratches suggesting that it was intended to add a further coat.



Figure 29 VII assembly mark



Figure 30 Wall plaster



Figure 31 Attic door

In the centre of the partition is a door (Fig.31) opening into the western space. Made of two planks secured by three battens, the upper hinge has a plain H shape, while the

lower is a cross-garnet with an unusual decorated fixing plate. Both are nailed in place.



Figure 32 Western attic room



Figure 33 Detail of roof truss

The space beyond the partition truss is a two-bay room (Fig.32) with a fireplace in the west gable wall and another A-frame roof truss at its centre. This truss has fine details such as a stop-chamfered collar and principal rafters (Fig.33).

The purlins are supported by the stone gable wall, and are butted to the truss above the collar, where they are secured by a loose tenon passing through the rafter and pegged to each section of purlin with a pair of wooden pegs (Fig.33). The tenon itself can be seen in Fig.34 at the soffit of the purlin just above the chiselled I assembly marks on collar and principal.



Figure 34 Assembly marks at collar



Figure 35 South roof slope

The lower tier of purlins are also fixed in the same way (Fig.35), but structural issues have necessitated the introduction of short raking struts to support the joint.

Fig.36 shows the corresponding north purlin joint, which has been strengthened using iron bolts – and presumably a plate behind. The loose tenon for the lower purlin can be seen in Fig.27 above where it emerges from the partition truss, but does not connect with the present purlin in the eastern bay.

There is a level mark on the face of the north purlin (Fig.37) – a different design from that on the kitchen bressumer.



Figure 36 Strut and bolts at north purlin



Figure 37 Level mark on north purlin

There is a straight wind-brace between the upper purlin and the partition truss (Fig.38). This illustration also shows the pegs that fix the rafters to the purlins, but also that some of the purlins have been renewed, and indeed only a few extend down the whole of the roof slope. The replacement of rafters has required a plank ridge to be inserted to support the tops of those that can reach it. Fig.39 shows the north roof slope, where there are also many replacement rafters.



Figure 38 Windbrace at partition truss



Figure 39 North roof slope

The roofs of the gabled north wings can be seen from within this attic space. The roof of the easternmost wing is shown in Fig.40. This is a common-rafter roof with no



Figure 40 Eastern wing roof



Figure 41 Purlin of wing resting on main roof

intermediate truss, the rafters being supported by long purlins, separated in the centre by a birdsmouth collar. The purlins are simply lodged over those of the front range of the house (Fig.41), so the wing roof has no independent structural stability, suggesting that it was built on to a pre-existing structure. This is confirmed by the fact that all the

rafters of the front range are present and intact. There is a plank ridge (which may be secondary).

The western north wing roof can also be seen (Fig.42). Its construction is similar to that of the other wing. The main difference, however, is that there has been a greater disturbance in the main range rafters at the junction of the two roofs. In particular, one of the replacement rafters (Fig.43) has an empty mortice and appears to be sooted, so possibly reused from a medieval context somewhere.



Figure 42 Western wing roof



Figure 43 Reused medieval timber

A note on the rear outbuilding is contained at Annex 1.

History

Wheatley was in the parish of Cuddesdon until the Reformation, after which it gradually gained its independence. Crown Road was once part of the London to Oxford road that passed along the top of Shotover Plain. There are some other 17th-century houses along the road, including Rectory Farmhouse, tree-ring dated to 1630. Until the turnpike by-passed the village, coaching and associated trades were an important source of income, while before that, quarrying was the major industry, with ochre as well as the local coral ragstone being the main products.

In 1910, Ambrose Farm was owned by William Boughton, Mortlake Rd, Kew, and was farmed by Charles Shepherd.⁸ Felix Lam has carried out some research into the previous owners of the property. For further guidance, see Alcock (2003).

Some early photographs survive, including one showing that there was a doorway in the south wall near the west end of the house.

Discussion

While the alterations and additions to Ambrose Farm in the 1920s have obscured much of the earlier details in the main range, the nature of these alterations is fairly clear – modern beams and metal windows of the Crittall type, for example – there does appear to be sufficient evidence in the roof structure to develop an understanding

⁸<https://www.oxfordshire.gov.uk/cms/sites/default/files/folders/documents/leisureandculture/history/col/lections/districtvaluation/DV-XII-19.pdf>

of the primary phase and some later developments. The main caveat is that an accurate ground plan with wall thickness measurements may throw up significant differences that could affect this initial interpretation.

The main range seems to have been of three bays, represented by G1-G3 today. Despite the photographic evidence of an entrance door into G1, it would be unusual for the main entrance of a house to be directly into a room with such an imposing fireplace. Although only two bays of the roof structure survive, they contain sufficient evidence to be fairly sure that it dates from the first half of the 17th century – the chiselled assembly marks, use of loose tenons, for example. The careful chamfering of the central truss seems a throwback to the times when carpenters knew their work would be visible to the occupants of the house. The style of the fire surround in G1 is consistent with this period, as are some of the window and door furniture elsewhere in the house. As with other local houses, the presence of gable-end chimneystacks does not imply a later period, as it often does where timber-framed houses predominate.

Unfortunately, due to the rebuilding of the rest of the roof, and the early 20th century alterations there is now no evidence for any other early chimneystacks (the lateral stacks to G2 and G3 are probably from around 1800) or where the staircase(s) were situated in the primary phase. It is thus difficult to say how the various spaces in the house were used, though by analogy G1 would have been the parlour, G2 the entrance hall with staircase as now, and G3 a chamber. It is also possible that the house was divided at some time in the 19th century – but more work on the ownership and occupational history is needed to test this, as the structural evidence has largely gone.

It is, however, clear that the western attic room was intended from the start, as the partition studs could not have been introduced after the truss was in place. The fireplace does, though, seem to be a later insertion, but the room does not seem to have been used, as the fireplace is clean and the plasterwork incomplete.

As for the wings to the north, the fact that the ground floor walls do not correspond to the present gabled structures above suggests that the latter were created as a result of a later rebuilding – perhaps in the 1720s, when segmental arches were in fashion. The evidence of the roof structures in the attic suggests that these gables were built at about the same time, and after the roof of the main range. There is, however, a major question about the ground floor space represented by G4 and G5 – is this contemporary with, or even earlier, than the main range? One possibility, for example, is that G4/G5 was a detached kitchen – the blocked window in F1 suggests that G4/G5 was either single-storey or did not abut the main range.

Finally, there is the matter of the 1776 date-stone. If the above analysis is correct, this cannot be taken as indicating when the front range was built. So does it represent a later building phase, or simply a change of ownership? It could relate to the reconstruction of G4/G5 and the pair of gables, but it is an odd place to put such a commemoration – most are prominently displayed on an external elevation.

Conclusion

One interpretation is that Ambrose Farm was built in the early 17th century as a three-unit house parallel to Crown Road, with a detached kitchen to the rear at the west. In

1776, a later owner reconstructed the kitchen block, attaching it to the house, and raising a two-storey chamber block with twin gables to the north. Additional chimneys were added to the main building in the 19th century, and at some point two-thirds of the roof had to be rebuilt. There was a major phase of alterations in the 1920s, but nothing major since then.

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Annex 1 Rear outbuilding

To the rear of the house is a long, narrow outbuilding, with a stone rear wall and at one time an open front facing south.



Annex 1 Fig. 1 Shed interior



Annex 1 Fig. 2 Detail of tethering ring

The roof structure is modern, as is the concrete floor with drainage channels (Fig.1). Along the rear wall is a concrete plinth into which are set short timber posts at regular intervals (Fig.2). Each has an iron tethering ring about 12 inches from the base.

Heather Horner, OBR's specialist on agricultural buildings, adds that 'The long shed at Ambrose farm has probably been used as a (hand) milking parlour – the animals tethered temporarily with a clip-on neck chain, with their heads in a bucket of feed to keep them quiet while the dairymaid worked at the other end.'