

THE BUILDING MATERIALS OF SOMERSET'S VERNACULAR HOUSES

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INTRODUCTION

Despite innumerable losses by fire, neglect and demolition, Somerset retains a fine heritage of vernacular buildings which, through many centuries, have been the homes and workplaces of Somerset people. In contrast to the timberframed buildings characteristic of some other counties, however, the vernacular buildings of Somerset often hide their true age and nature from the casual observer, and have, as a result, received little attention from architectural historians until very recent years. Walls, typically of stone or cob, could be easily and inconspicuously raised and reroofed; early windows and doors have in many cases been replaced; and original internal features are frequently obscured by the plaster, paper, and fire-grates of a later time. Even apparently helpful date-stones refer, more often than not, to subsequent changes to a building rather than to its original date of construction.

That we now know so much more about vernacular architecture in Somerset is owing very largely to twenty years of research carried out by members of the Vernacular Architecture Group. Over 3,000 buildings have been studied, and records of all of them are now deposited at the Somerset Record Office, as well as with the National Buildings Record of the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. These records serve to illustrate how Somerset's vernacular houses and associated buildings were laid out and built from late medieval times onwards, how they were subsequently developed and modified to suit changing lifestyles, and finally how they often acquired a reduced social status: some were divided into two or three cottages, others downgraded to farm buildings, having been replaced by houses of more up to date design. The majority of the buildings considered in this article were constructed by unknown farmers and craftsmen, of whose lives the only record we have may be the houses in which they lived. A house may thus be treated almost as an historical document, to be studied alongside the written records of the more affluent, each source complimenting the other to give us a picture of the social life of our forefathers.

The study of vernacular architecture is the study of traditional building methods from the time when construction became of a sufficiently permanent nature to have survived to the present day, until the time when plans and building techniques ceased to follow local traditions. This time-span is referred to as the 'vernacular zone', whose terminal dates vary according to the size and status of the particular building under consideration, and, to some extent, according to the area being studied. The earliest surviving vernacular buildings are naturally to be found

amongst larger houses, a few of which, such as Bratton Court, Minehead, may date from the late 13th century. By the end of the 16th century, the larger houses had passed into the realms of 'polite' architecture, their designs following a national, or even international, style. Such houses are rare in Somerset and are excluded from this account. Houses of somewhat lower social standing retained their vernacular character until the 17th/18th century; these, together with the smaller houses of the late 15th to 18th centuries, and cottages of the 17th/18th century, form the bulk of the buildings to be described.

Some structural and decorative features to be found in Somerset's vernacular houses may vary considerably in their date ranges in different parts of the county, while some have close parallels in adjoining counties. Somerset to the west of Taunton has much in common with east Devon, while north-east Somerset shows affinities with Wiltshire and Gloucestershire. A particularly distinctive Somerset feature shared with east Devon and adjoining parts of Dorset is the jointed cruck truss. Such crucks can be found in a great many Somerset buildings, and are of a type and date-range unknown elsewhere in the British Isles.

BUILDING MATERIALS

Stone

Stone or cob was used in the construction of the majority of houses and farm buildings in Somerset, unlike many other areas of the British Isles where good quality timber was plentiful but building stone was scarce. The choice between stone or cob depended on the availability of suitable stone and on the wealth of the builder, particularly if transport was necessary. The importance of transport costs is well illustrated by the fact that Ham stone was extensively used in parishes within easy reach of Ham Hill: even quite small houses were entirely built of it. In more distant areas of the county, however, the use of Ham stone was confined to door and window dressings in better-quality buildings, and to other features such as quoins. Similarly, in the vicinity of Doulting the smallest houses have doorways of good quality Doulting stone, while in many other areas, particularly in the west of the county, wood was almost universally used for door and window frames, even in better-quality houses. Cary stone was used extensively in the vicinity of Castle Cary in houses of moderate yeoman status; further north, around Bath, little other than Bath stone is to be seen, and in central Somerset around Somerton and Keinton Mandeville houses are generally of lias. In the south of the county, near Chard, chert rubble is widely used; it looks not unlike flint, which does not occur in Somerset, and was knapped into regular sizes and shapes to build well-coursed walls of very neat appearance.

For houses of the highest quality, the more easily-worked stone such as that from Ham Hill or Bath was dressed into ashlar blocks. The use of ashlar was, however, often restricted to front walls, the back and even the gables being of rubble. Sometimes, as a Long Croft, Sea, Ilminster, ashlar occurs at what is now the back of the house, because the approach to the building has been altered. Where well-dressed stone is used, extremely thin joints can be obtained, in contrast to the thick, uneven jointing necessary with rubble. In the hands of an expert mason, however, even rubble can be very finely dressed, as is the case, for example, at the mid-14th century Abbey Barn in Glastonbury.

An early form of 'damp course' is sometimes evident, as at Court House, Alhampton, Ditcheat, and at Galhampton Manor House, where limestone walls stand on a plinth of impervious lias. Lias was also quarried in the form of large slabs

for flag-stone floors; these slabs, known locally as 'shields', account for the name Shield House in Keinton Mandeville, where some internal walls consist of enormous stones set vertically which measure c. 6 ft high, c. 5 ft wide and 3-4 in. thick.

In the west of the county, the houses of the Quantock area are built of the delightful red sandstone found to the north of Taunton. As we go further west along the Brendon Hills into Exmoor, however, the local stone deteriorates into slaty rubble of very poor quality. With this inferior material it remained necessary well into the 17th century to build walls up to 30 in. thick – as would have been usual in the medieval period – at a time when walls built with better-quality stone were normally c. 2 ft thick. In the sparsely populated moorland areas, another reason for the persistence of such substantial walls may have been the insufficient demand for full-time masons and the absence of wealth to pay for high-quality buildings. By contrast, at the Priest's House, Muchelney, the abbey masons built walls only c. 2 ft thick in the 14th century; such thin walls are exceptional at so early a date, but there is no evidence of later rebuilding.

Very occasionally, as at The Firs, Horton, near Ilminster, dressed rubble walls may have their regular courses interrupted at intervals by extra-large stones; a wall is then said to be 'snecked'. Unusually fine decoration is provided at Slough Court, Stoke St Gregory, where the front wall is built in alternate bands of Ham stone and lias, and on the porch is an additional row of diagonally-set Ham stone blocks. Drip moulds and stringcourses over doors and windows are very often in a free-working material such as Ham stone, irrespective of the material used for the walls, and in spite of their functional nature provide a decorative finish. In the same way, relieving arches over door and window openings, designed to take the weight of the upper walls off the lintels, add interest to otherwise blank expanses of masonry.

Cob

Cob was the most common early building material in areas where stone was not readily available. It was made by mixing clay with small stones, straw and water, cow dung and hair being added as a binder. At the lower social levels and for farm buildings it continued in use until comparatively recent times, but until the early 17th century was used also in many better-quality houses. Cob is extremely durable if it is adequately protected by being placed on a stone base under a watertight covering. It was usually colour-washed or plastered, except in some farm buildings. The stone base may vary from a couple of feet to nearly half the height of the wall, and the thickness of the cob was usually over 2 ft; there was usually internal batter, the top of the wall being thinner than the base, and this feature is often a clue to cob construction when a wall is hidden by plaster. Sometimes shuttering was used during construction. If the wall was built in layers without shuttering, each layer was trodden down and allowed to dry before the next was added; the rough surfaces of the wall had to be pared off when dry, but they remained irregular, and provide another indicator of cob construction.

It is not uncommon for a later casing of stone or brick to have been added to a cob wall, or for the cob to have been completely replaced by such materials. The thinner wall which resulted in such cases is revealed – as, for example, at Yatford, Broadway – by the fact that the ends of the ceiling beams no longer 'fit' the walls. At Greenway Farm, North Curry – originally a low, two-roomed two-storey cottage – the cob walls are cased in brick, and a third room and a kitchen wing entirely of brick were added in the 18th century.

Cob, although not uncommon elsewhere, is most frequently found in the west of

Somerset, which thus, as in some other respects, shows many similarities with east Devon. As yet, cob has been found in only one house in south Avon: at Latcham House, Kenn, a stone house has one wall partly of cob, presumably the remains of a house that has otherwise been completely rebuilt.

Timberframing

Timberframed walls, in so far as they are apparent today, appear to have been mostly confined to town houses. There are, however, rare exceptions elsewhere: Weylands, West Lambrook, Kingsbury Episcopi, has a completely timberframed wing which was added in the 16th century to a medieval stone house; and Chilliswood Farm, Trull, has a 17th century wing added with timberframed upper walls over ground-floor stone walls. Chipley Park barn, near Langford Budville, of the 16th/17th century, is a unique building in the county: it was constructed with wholly timberframed walls, now much rebuilt, and is one of only a very few completely aisled buildings in Somerset, all of them barns.

Poundisford Farm, Pitminster, is an exceptionally good example of a timberframed house which has been largely rebuilt with solid walls; one section of the hall has retained its timberframed wall intact, together with a large timberframed window, owing to the fact that the wall became internal when a 17th century wing was added. The other rebuilt walls are extremely thin, lacking the bulk of medieval walls. Unusually thin walls, in a house which has evidence of a medieval origin, are found at Grant's, Rumwell, Bishops Hull: empty mortices for wall plates in the top of the cruck uprights indicate that solid walls have replaced timberframed ones. Another very good example is Chantry Cottage, Trull, where cob walls, later partly rebuilt in brick, have replaced timberframing: a post and truss structure has a vertical tenon cut solid with the post at the top of its outer face which would have carried the wall plate. At Gatchell Cottage, Trull, the hall walls are now of cob, but were formerly timberframed; the evidence for this is provided by a corner brace to a post, which can be seen internally, and which with solid walls is unnecessary (Fig. 1). The Blake Museum, Bridgwater, still with a timberframed external wall, has similar braces.

In town houses, only the street facade was timberframed, the remainder being of stone; often the timberframing was confined to the upper floors, the ground floor being of stone, or in some cases being shop windows so that the original structure is unknown. The best example of such a building, partly restored, is 'King John's Hunting Lodge' (the museum) at Axbridge, which dates from c. 1500. In origin, this building was a block of four shops, each with living and storage accommodation contained on the two upper storeys, both of them jettied out over the pavement. Being on a corner site, where the High Street meets the marketplace, the building has two timbered street facades. To carry the jetty round the corner, and to support the inner ends of the jettied floor joists, large diagonally-set floor beams, called dragon beams, are used (Fig. 2). From evidence seen at 18 Fore Street, Taunton, the shop-fronts would have had horizontally hinged shutters which when opened would have provided horizontal surfaces on which to display goods for sale. Another three-storeyed block of shops, differing only in that the ground floor has stone walls, is the so-called Nunnery at Dunster, now a row of three cottages: the jettied timberframed upper walls are now slate hung. In the High Street at Axbridge are several buildings with jettied fronts now plastered over, and some with modern shop fronts built forward under the jettied upper floor. In Dunster and Somerton are houses which have had jettied upper floors underbuilt with solid walled extensions. In Bruton, 34 and 36 High Street, formerly the Abbey Court House, have a rendered facade, but the upper floor is jettied and is thus obviously timberframed.

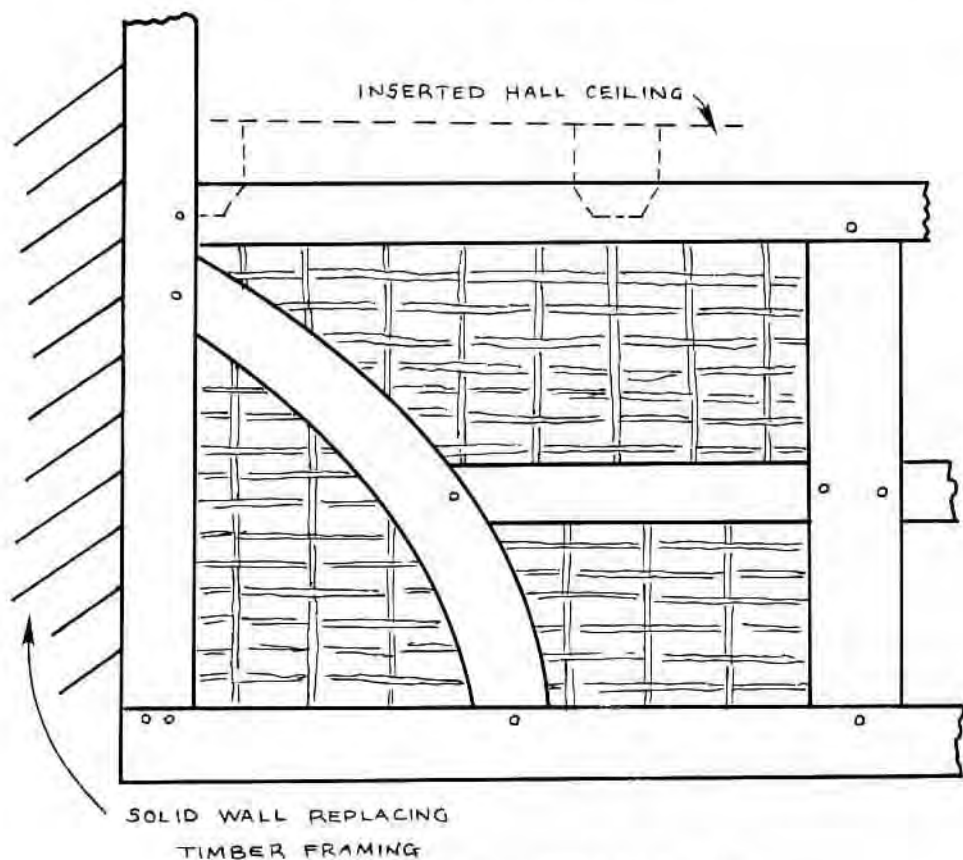


Fig. 1 Gatchell Cottage, Trull Partition with Corner Brace

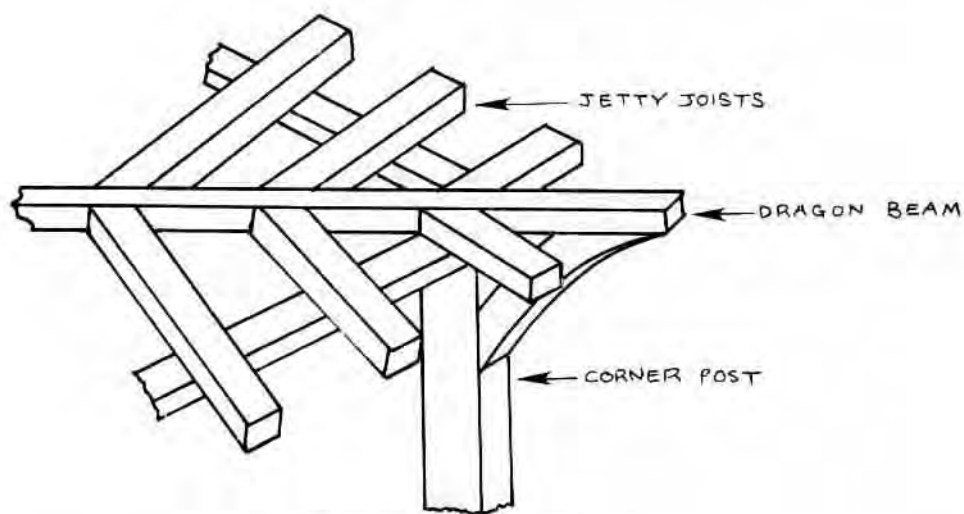


Fig. 2 Axbridge Museum, Dragon Beam

A very rare example in the north-east of the county is the George Inn, Norton St Philip, a large and complex building fully described in the *Archaeological Journal*, vol. 144 (1987). Briefly, the original late 14th century building was entirely stone-walled; about 1500, the street front was rebuilt with two jettied timberframed upper walls over a stone ground floor. Nearby, to the east of Frome, is Rodden Manor, which includes a rare country example of timberframed construction. So far as its original plan can be interpreted, a stone-walled hall and service room had a partly timberframed parlour cross wing, its jettied gable now underbuilt in stone. One other rarity close to the Wiltshire border is Redbridge Cottage, at Berkley near Beckington, where an exposed gable cruck truss has an infill of brick nogging in its timberframing.

18 Fore Street, Taunton, like many town houses, stands gable-end on to the street, and occupies a narrow-fronted site of considerable depth. A side passage, which survives as Bath Place, provides access to the rear, where, beyond a courtyard, stands a detached building; beyond a second courtyard there was formerly a second detached building. When the need for enlargement occurred, it was thus only possible to extend the building forward into the street, a practice which was also adopted at the Tudor Tavern, Taunton, the King's Head Inn, Wells, and in Broad Street, Bath: owing to encroachment of this kind in the 16th/17th century, Broad Street is now in fact a very narrow road. 18 Fore Street underwent extensive alteration and modernisation some years ago, and much structural detail which had been exposed during the stripping of the 19th century shop (Adcock's the chemist), has been hidden or destroyed. The front section of the building has a late 18th–19th century stone facade, replacing a 16th century jettied timberframed front; this front section was an extension into the street added to a medieval house which in its turn was timber-fronted. The rear wall of the medieval building is also timberframed, but was much rebuilt in the 17th century when a ten-light ovolo-moulded wooden window was inserted.

The Tudor Tavern, formerly a wealthy merchant's house, still displays its ornate jettied timber frontage of 1578 which replaced an earlier front of 1384 and extended the building forward into the street. The 14th century frontage was a forward extension of a yet earlier building, evidence for which can be seen in the stonework of the passage which runs to one side of the building. Like 18 Fore Street, the King's Head Inn, Wells, has a late 18th–19th century stone facade, which replaced a jettied timber frontage added to an open medieval hall building.

Internal Walls

Internal walls, although sometimes of stone or cob, are more often of timberframed construction. Until the 16th century, the timberframed panels of internal walls were large and rectangular, with wattle stakes set vertically (Figs 3 & 4); in the 17th century, the panels became tall and narrow with the stakes set horizontally without wattling, in the so-called 'rod and daub' manner (Fig. 5). A common alternative was a stud and panel screen (Fig. 6), which consisted of alternate thick studs and thinner planks, the latter slotted into the studs and into the head and sill beams; such screens date from the late medieval period to 17th century. Partitions are usually, but not always, associated with roof trusses; until the early 17th century, the latter were usually crucks, but were sometimes post and truss structures. The uprights of the trusses rise from near ground level, but being buried in the solid walls are not visible externally.

Although timberframed external walls were possibly more common than is now apparent, their relative scarcity probably reflects the lack of adequate timber supplies in the county. It is probably for the same reason that in Somerset, east

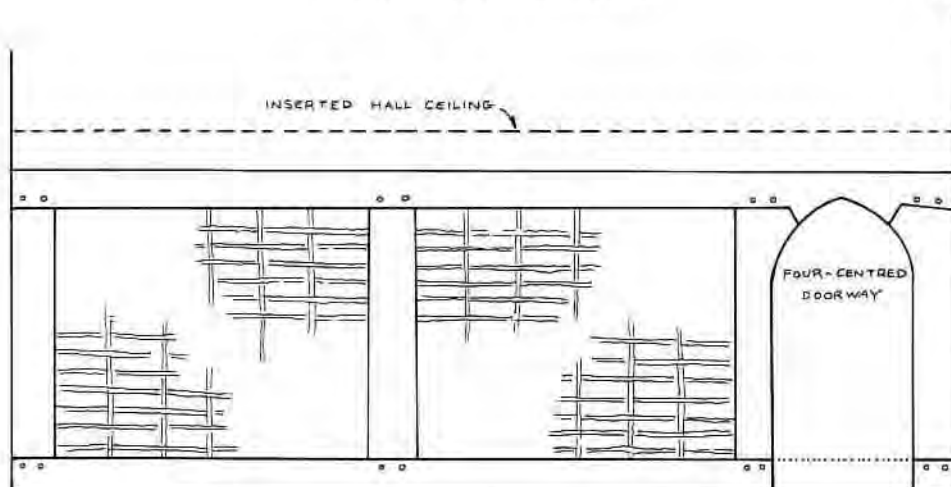


Fig. 3 15th Century 'Low' Partition

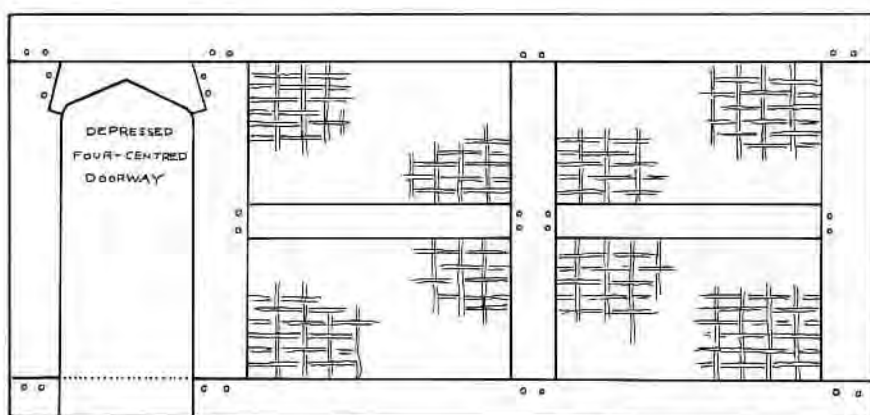


Fig. 4 16th Century Partition

Devon, and adjoining parts of Dorset, true crucks are far outnumbered by the jointed variety, in which a rafter is jointed to a post with an inward curving top. Both in style and date range, these south-western jointed crucks are peculiar to the area, and were presumably adopted because there was a shortage of the long curved timbers, formed from the trunk and branch of a tree, which were necessary for the making of true crucks (Fig. 7). Roof structures will be more fully discussed in a future article.

Brick

Bricks first appear as a building material in the 17th century, but were by no means common until the 18th century. In this early period, bricks were made on site in 'clamps', and it was not until the 19th century, when the development of factory-made bricks and tiles began, that their use became widespread. A clamp consisted of piles of dried bricks stacked with layers of fuel and covered with clay or earth, much like a potato clamp today. The fuel was generally brushwood, tree and

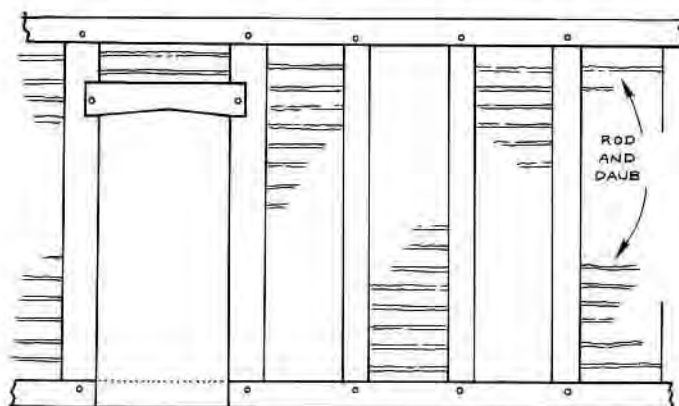
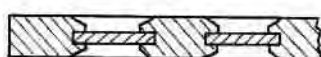


Fig. 5 17th Century Partition



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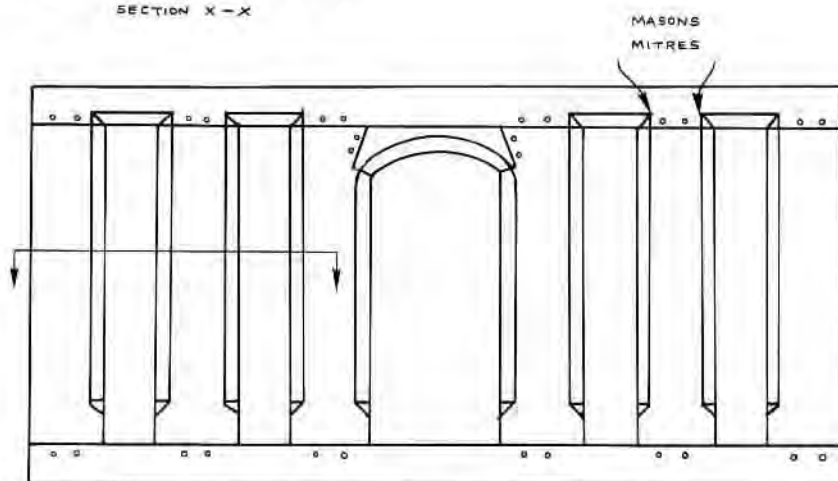


Fig. 6 Stud and Panel Screen

hedge trimmings, or gorse: the latter was almost entirely the fuel used to fire the clamps for the bricks from which Crowcombe Court was built in 1724-5. Occasionally coal was used, as at Hinton House in 1653, and also at Chipley, near Langford Budville, in 1680; research by Mrs P Flower-Smith into the history of the Clarke family of Chipley has revealed that the coal, presumably of Welsh origin, was brought from Watchet on pack horses. Bricks were also used in 1675 by John Sanford in building Nynheath Court nearby.

After firing, the clamps were broken open and fresh ones built for the next batch. Overall control of the heat was impossible and resulted in some bricks being over-burnt and dark in colour, while others were under-fired and pale; colour also varied according to the type of clay used. Shrinkage was variable, and other irregularities, such as surface creasing, also occurred. The texture was often open and coarse. Irregularity in size was overcome by laying the bricks with thick mortar

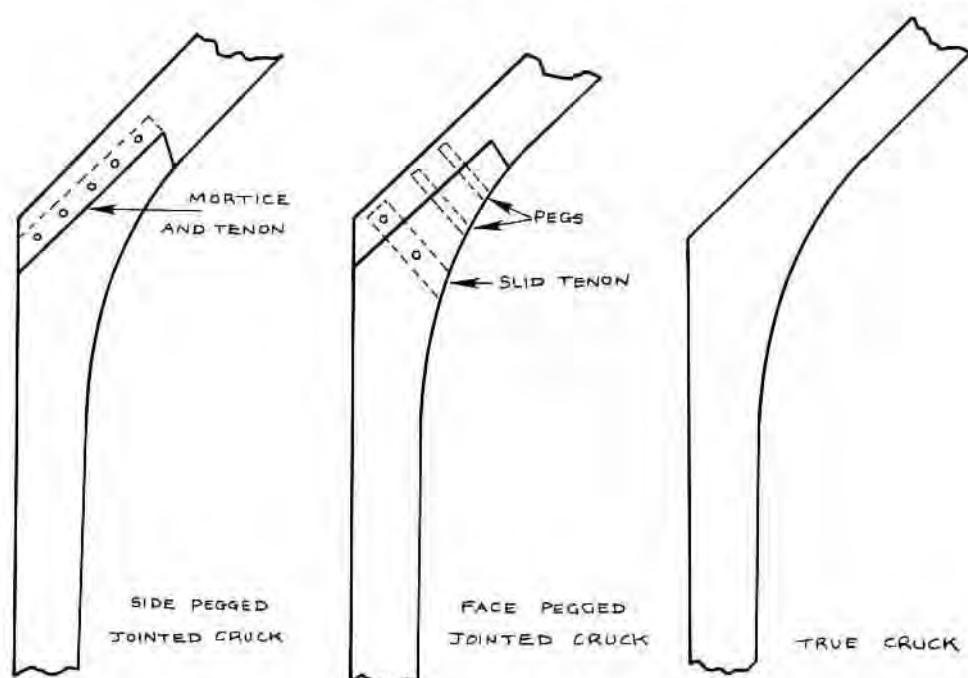


Fig. 7 Jointed Crucks and True Cruck

joints. Generally, early bricks were longer and thinner than their later factory equivalents, which were perfectly regular in form.

Bricks may be laid in a number of different bonds. Bricks were used in eastern England in medieval times and the bonding was usually haphazard. By the Tudor period, however, the standard practice was to lay the bricks in courses of headers alternating with courses of stretchers, resulting in what is known as English bond. The only example recorded in Somerset where this bond was used consistently is at Gray's Almshouses, Taunton, a building dated 1635, and the earliest brick structure in the county, so far as is known. It is unlikely that anything earlier exists in Somerset since the first recorded bricks in Bristol are in the mid 16th century when they were clearly an expensive novelty. Other buildings of later date occasionally contain some English bond but it is relegated to the back or side walls, and Flemish bond predominates: in this bond, every course consists of alternating headers and stretchers, the vertical joints in each course being staggered. In the 18th century, English garden bond was sometimes used, in which three to five courses of stretchers alternate with one course of headers; but even in these later periods some miscellaneous bonds occur.

Gray's Almshouses, Taunton, were built by a wealthy London merchant in the town of his birth. Bricks were a new building material in the south west, but Thomas Gray would have been familiar with their earlier use in the eastern counties. The next brick building which can be precisely dated is of 1652. In that year, the Poulett estate accounts refer to the manufacture of bricks at Hinton House, and it seems very probable that they were used to build Warren Lodge at the south-west corner of the Park: this is a 17th century house with brickfaced rubble walls in irregular bond. At Barrington Court, the brick stable block dates from 1674, and was largely built in Flemish bond over a few lower courses in

English bond. Wellisford Manor, Thorne St Margaret, is of c. 1700, and was built partly in English and partly in Flemish bond. From an inventory made prior to 1684, it appears that the brick wings had by that date been added to Cutcliffe Farm, Wilton, Taunton.

Ashford, Ilton, is the earliest dated brick farmhouse in the county, and was built in 1703 in Flemish bond. An interesting parallel is provided by the nearby Broughton Farm, which was rebuilt in 1710 but in stone. Another Ilton building of relevance is the Whetstone Almshouses, built within a few years of the Gray's Almshouses, Taunton, but still in the traditional stone of Somerset. Lindsey Cottage, Drayton, of 1737, has Flemish bond at the front but English garden bond in the gables, providing an indication, perhaps, of the date of School Farm, Muchelney, where the front of a medieval house was rebuilt two full storeys high in garden bond. Langport Guild Hall of 1733 has Flemish bond at the front but English bond at the sides; two other familiar examples of brick building are 23 Silver Street, Taunton, and the Unitarian Chapel, Bridgwater.

Of special interest is Huish Barton, Nettlecombe, the most westerly known example of 17th century brickwork: to the rear of an earlier house is an unusual addition mainly in brick. It consists of one very large room open to a flat beamed ceiling, originally plastered, at a height equivalent to two storeys. All that remains of the plasterwork is a panel dated 1698, set over a gable fireplace and bearing the Musgrave monogram. The Musgraves were tenants, and had attempted to create a pseudo-medieval hall. The bricks, in Flemish bond, are only 2 in. deep, and have very thick mortar joints, the only other bricks which are as thin being those at Gray's Almshouses. This brick addition is dated between 1647, the date of the Musgrave lease, and 1698, the date on the plaster. A number of undated houses can on stylistic grounds be attributed to the 17th century: examples are Hamwood Farm, Trull, in miscellaneous bond; the so-called Manor House, Galmington, Taunton, where an added wing has a plaster ceiling of not later than the first half of the 17th century; Baker's Farm, Puckington; and New House Farm, Ilton (now known as Fursey Farm). At the last three houses, a stringcourse of dog-toothed pattern is formed over the ground floor windows by protruding bricks, which, at the last two, arch over the windows and doors in a manner also seen at Ashford Farm. Ilton, Cutcliffe Farm, Trull, has a straight dog-toothed stringcourse which, as stated above, can be dated to before 1680; a brick addition at Ilford Bridge Farm, Ilton, can be similarly dated. Also of the 17th century is Rowland's Mill, Ashill, where the front is a mixture of brick and stone. The front of Brompton Ralph Manor Farmhouse was refaced in brick, with a stringcourse, during the 17th century, and has an early 18th century brick wing, the latter dated by an 18th century doorway with shell hood and a very fine early 18th century staircase. Another example of English garden bond is a wing at Newton House, North Newton, which is of 17th/18th century date. Higher Hill Farm Barn, Butleigh, a large aisled structure, has an extremely unusual lining of bricks to its stone walls, probably datable to c. 1700. The only example of moulded brickwork known is at Barford House, Enmore, which is of the 18th century. Castle Street, Bridgwater, of 1723, is probably the earliest terrace of brick houses.

Documents in the Somerset Record Office provide much information concerning the production of bricks on site for Hinton House and Crowcombe Court, and include a contract for the making of bricks at Chipley. There are also references to a brick layer in Bristol in 1662, and of special interest is a record in the Bristol City archives entitled 'Servants to Foreign Plantations' which includes brick layers from Bridgwater and Drayton indentured to serve four years in Barbados in 1650 and 1654. Research by Dr Cary Carson of Williamsburg, Virginia, has revealed the

extensive use of bricks by 17th century settlers in Maryland and Virginia, the majority of whom came from the south-west of England, and sailed as 'Indentured Servants' from the port of Bristol.

ROOFS AND FLOORS

Thatch

Thatch was the most common early roofing material throughout most of the county except in the north-east where, as in adjoining Gloucestershire, stone tiles were used. With thatch, a steep pitch was necessary to throw off the rain; sometimes two or three courses of stone tiles were laid at the eaves to protect the most vulnerable part of the structure; these stone tiles sometimes survive, as, for example, at Montacute, where clay tiles or slate have otherwise replaced the thatch. Redundant drip courses on stacks, or coped gables high above the present day roofs, show where thatch was formerly used. In recent times, thatch was laid on battens and secured by spars cut from hazel, willow, ash or chestnut; in medieval times thatch was most commonly laid on wattling, and to give a broad bearing surface, the common rafters were broad, thin, and laid flat. More often than not, rethatching involved only renewal of the top layers, and it is not uncommon to find houses today with their original heavily smoke-blackened under thatch still so supported.

In some areas our early ancestors would have used broom, heather or bracken, but in Somerset water reed or wheat straw are the materials we see on houses today. Wheat straw is cheaper than water reed, but is less durable; water reed is no longer available from English sources and has to be imported from Europe. Wheat straw still has to be cut with a reaper in this age of combine harvesters and then threshed in a reed comber to preserve the straw intact. The beauty of a thatched roof cannot be equalled in any other material. It allows valleys and dormers to be swept into smooth curves within the overall pattern of the roof.

Stone Tiles

With few exceptions, such as in villages near the Dorset border, stone tiles are found almost entirely in the north-east of the county, which thus has a 'Cotswold' flavour about it. Good examples of their use can be found at Norton St Philip and Beckington, where all the older houses are stone tiled. Further south, stone tiles are found exceptionally at the Abbey Barn, Glastonbury: during recent repairs by Somerset County Council, the 19th century clay tiles were replaced by stone tiles brought from the Cotswolds, thus restoring what seems to have been the type of roof covering used when the barn was built in the mid-14th century. Another Abbey Barn, at Doultling, is also stone tiled. These are instances where the expense of stone tiles could be afforded by a wealthy builder. During drastic rebuilding some years ago, the roof of Waldron's Farm, Ashbrittle, was reroofed with stone tiles, although the farm lies in the western area of the county where the material is unknown.

Stone tiles were secured by oaken pegs to strong laths, and, like early slates, were graded in size from larger ones at the eaves to smaller ones at the ridge.

Slate

Before the development of the railways, slates were used only in areas close to a source of supply, or where water transport was available: slates were brought, for example, from Delabole in North Devon to the ports of Minehead and Watchet. An inexplicable exception is Charlton Mackrell Manor Farm, which is remote from any natural source of slate. On early slated roofs, slates are graded in size, and

become progressively smaller from eaves to ridge. Much of the slate seen today probably replaced earlier thatch when, in the 19th century, improved transport made possible the importation of slate from distant sources, and especially from Wales. These later slates are of uniform size and thickness. Slate was probably first used on a large scale in towns, where it provided a fireproof substitute for inflammable thatch. It can be laid satisfactorily on roofs of quite low profile, as is seen on many Somerset houses where earlier, steeper roofs have been completely reconstructed. In addition to the uniform size of later slates, they are also less variable in colour. In districts of heavier rainfall, as, for example, in the Brendon Hills, walls are sometimes slate hung, especially on the weather side.

Clay Tiles

The most common forms of clay tile are either plain, flat rectangles (the earliest form), tiles curved in a flat S, called pantiles, or so-called roman tiles, which have a corrugated profile. The earliest use of tiles probably coincided with, or closely followed, the introduction of bricks, although it is not uncommon to see a brick house which is thatched, such as Ashford Farm, Ilton. Pantiles, in particular, are common in Somerset, especially in the Bridgwater/Somerton area. It is doubtful if any are earlier than the 18th century, and the majority are probably of the 19th century, many having been used as replacements for thatch. Early plain tiles were cambered, giving roofs a distinctive appearance which is lacking in later roofs. Plain tiles are nailed but pantiles and other types are notched over the laths by nibs moulded on the under side of the upper edges. Plain tiles must be hung at a fairly steep angle, whereas other types can be used at a lower pitch. The pitch of a roof is a good guide when assessing the age of a building from external appearances; but beware of reroofing on the raised walls of an earlier building: such reroofing can often be detected by changes in walling material.

Floors

Except in higher-quality houses, early floors were of beaten earth, reputedly mixed with ox blood; when the flagstones of a house in Ashcott were recently lifted, earth floors of a dark pink colour were revealed. Lime ash – that is, the waste from a lime kiln – was mixed with gravel and water to produce hard-wearing floors. Occasionally cobbled floors are found, and they may have been more common than the few surviving floors suggest; in Compton Dundon, the entrance passage of a 16th century house is still cobbled; another example is seen in a house at Dulverton. For those who could afford them, flagstones were an obvious choice. In the 19th century, brick floors were often laid, especially in kitchens and dairies. Many 18th century parlours had wooden floors installed, a material seldom seen elsewhere at ground level. In some farm buildings, an upper floor will be found cemented over, indicating that the building was used for malting. Such is the case at Nethercote, Lydeard St Lawrence, where a malting kiln has been added beside an earlier building.

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